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HANDS-ON

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PC GAMER

#388 NOVEMBER 2023

Future Publishing Ltd

Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA

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December 2018



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Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR)

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"MECHWARRIOR HAS ALWAYS BEEN A BIG PART OF PC GAMING"



MechWarrior is one of those series that I feel has always been a big part of PC gaming. From the moment it first offered PC gamers the chance to enter the cockpit of a hundred-tonne BattleMech in 1989 and pilot it to commit acts of explosive, stompy carnage, we've had over 10 other *MechWarrior* games released and a host of other mecha series like *Titanfall* and

Armored Core influenced by it.

Now, Piranha Games is about to take the series to new heights with *MechWarrior 5: Clans*, as our huge cover feature reveals on page 40.

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR
robert.jones@futurenet.com



The PC Gamer team



WES FENLON
Twitter
@wesleyfenlon

This month
Broke sci-fi roguelike deckbuilder *Earthless* on preview with an elite card combo. Made its devs cry.



ROBIN VALENTINE
Twitter
@robinvalentine

This month
Played tic-tac-toe with Gordrakk and won. Then spent weeks extracting himself from Maw-Krusha.



TED LITCHFIELD
Twitter
@DORFpatrol

This month
Got promoted to PC Gamer BattleMech pilot. Stomped to Vancouver for a latte.



HARVEY RANDALL
Twitter
@HJRwithpen

This month
Was disappointed to learn that Umbral, the land of the dead, has no Maccy D's franchise.

PC Gamer (ISSN 1351-3540, USPS 24170), November issue 388, is published monthly with an extra issue in April by Future Publishing, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA, UK. Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named World Container INC 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA. Periodicals Postage Paid at Brooklyn, NY 11256. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to PC Gamer, Air Business Ltd, c/o World Container INC 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA.

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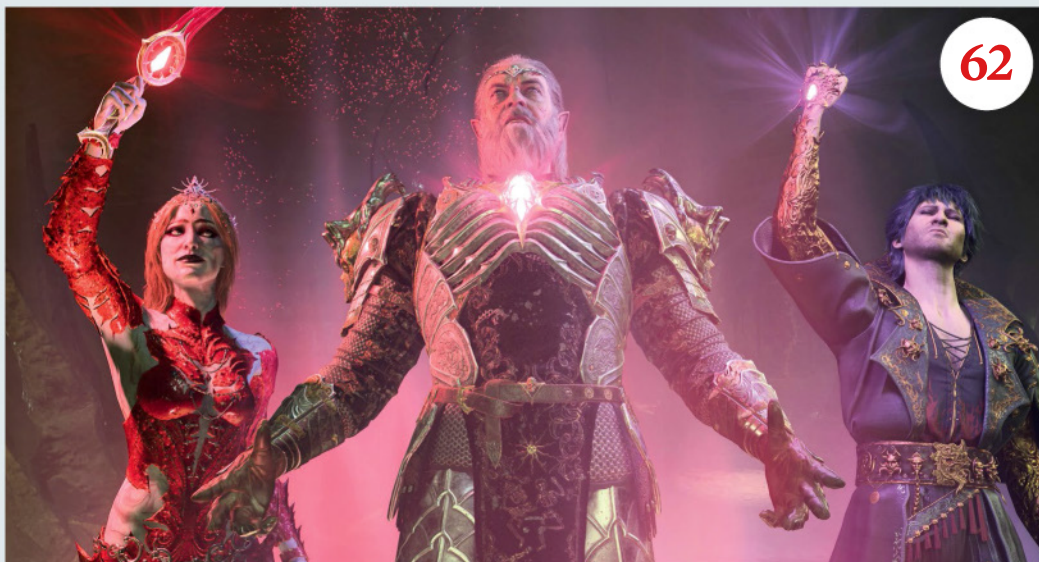
Dominic Tarason reports in after playing the much-anticipated third instalment in the *Homeworld* series of tactical sci-fi RTS games. Out of this world adventures await.

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MONITOR

NEWS | ON DEVELOPMENT



The producer's comments elicited a predictable response.

WHICH WITCHER?

NETFLIX GUY blames “Americans and young people” for dumbing down

Former Geralt Henry Cavill has made a point of saying he “pushed really, really hard” to stay true to the *Witcher* books, while also claiming that some of the writers on the show “actively disliked” them.

Some aspects of Andrzej Sapkowski's novels have been simplified for the TV show, and in an interview with Polish site Wyborcza, executive producer Tomek Baginski said: “[A] higher level of nuance and complexity will have a smaller range.”

Baginski said he encountered a “perceptual block” with American

audiences some years ago, when he was promoting an unfinished film project called *Hardkor 44*, a sci-fi retelling of the Warsaw Uprising.

“For Americans, it was completely incomprehensible, too complicated, because they grew up in a different historical context, where everything was arranged: America is always

“FOR AMERICANS, IT WAS COMPLETELY INCOMPREHENSIBLE, TOO COMPLICATED”

good, the rest are the bad guys. And there are no complications.”

That lesson, whether you agree with it or not, apparently stuck.

“When a series is made for a huge mass of viewers [and] a large part of them are Americans, these simplifications not only make sense, they are necessary,” Baginski said.

“It’s painful for us, and for me too, but the higher level of nuance and complexity will have a smaller range.”

Zinging the US has been a pan-European pastime of highfalutin creatives for decades, sure, but even so the specificity of Baginski’s criticism comes off as kind of weird and unnecessarily insulting.

ORBITAL OWLBEAR

BEAR DOES DAMAGE



Min-maxers are terrifying. You think you know everything there is to know about a game, and then someone cooks up a build that launches a 5,000kg owlbear from 100ft on some poor sod, dealing enough damage to one-shot an adult dragon with no saving throw. The Sword Coast trembles. ■ **HR**

PUCKER UPWARDS

NO KISSING FOR GNOMES



Playing a gnome or halfling in *Baldur's Gate III*? Better buy a stepladder. Players of the pint-sized races have been having a little trouble on the romance front recently, finding themselves unable to lock lips with NPCs like Karlach and kissing air instead. Don't worry, Larian's looking into it. ■ **JW**



METAL GEAR FLACCID

SNAKE'S RETURN



Metal Gear Solid: The Master Collection Vol 1 arrives in October, and having gone hands-on it's looking like these ports are as basic as you get: how does 240p output and 30fps grab you? Konami's also tying itself up in knots about mouse and keyboard support, which doesn't inspire confidence. ■ **RS**



TOP: The Witcher books are complicated as hell, maybe you can't just dump that on people.

ABOVE RIGHT: Geralt is always in that bath.

He's not done, either. In addition to laying the blame at the door of all Americans, Baginski had more shots to fire: in an interview with YouTube channel Imponderabilia, he pointed the finger at the kids, saying that growing up with YouTube and TikTok has left them without the patience for "longer content [and] long and complicated chains of cause and effect". The interviewer in this case said, "What you mean is that you don't know how to make a show that kids would like to watch." Ouch.

Baginski's comments have attracted scorn, coming as they do amidst a lukewarm reception to *The Witcher's* last season with Cavill. The show has changed many of the books' major plot points, but at a time when media is either an immediate hit or a complete failure, that's a problem. A YouTube adaptation, *Alzur's Legacy*, doesn't follow the exploits of Geralt but captures the flavour perfectly – and maybe simplifying the source material is what Netflix is really running up against.

The third season of *The Witcher* is now out in full on Netflix. We enjoyed the first half of the season quite a bit, but it's faring somewhat unevenly on review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes: It holds a 77% rating with critics, but just 22% with audiences. Season 4, like *The Witcher 4*, is going to be make-or-break. ■

Andy Chalk

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Most impressive

Nightdive is remaking 1995's *Star Wars: Dark Forces*.

Re-Deck

Valve has once again done a Valve, and you can buy a refurbished Steam Deck.

Black Isle's 25th

Obsidian has been celebrating 25 years of its predecessor Black Isle, one of the greatest RPG studios. Salut, you beautiful bastards.

R2 Much

A streamer spent so many hours grinding for every skill point in *Jedi Survivor's* opening level that they just gave up.

Red Dead

Take-Two has re-released *RDR1* on consoles without any enhancements for £40, but no PC release.

Don't tempt me reader

Post Malone bought the Ring of Sauron Magic: The Gathering card valued at \$2million.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The Spy is at home in the world of darkness. After all, covert operations work best under the cover of night. One consequence of these nocturnal wanderings, though, is that The Spy has become rather familiar with rubbing shoulders with the undead, and specifically vampires.

Indeed, it was only after Lestat de Lioncourt was particularly taken with The Spy that The Spy could then pass freely among the children of the damned unmolested. It just goes to show what a night of reading PC Gamer can do, even when those being read to were born in 1760.

One thing The Spy has learned from two-stepping with blood-sucking brethren is that you need to be prepared for long periods of silence in between the impromptu late-night visits and lengthy philosophical discussions on the meaning of existence. Many lesser spies with delicate egos will likely take these absences as a shot at their character, but The Spy knows better. Vampires, let The Spy tell you, love a good period of ghosting others, mainly because they themselves aren't half partial to a long sleep.

Eventually vampires will resurface, just like The Spy was cunningly waiting for *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2* to do in Seattle a few weeks back. This is the game that had its original developer, Hardsuit Labs, removed from its production back in 2020 following a delay in the game's release date and, allegedly, a troubled development.

Originally that delayed release date was supposed to be 2021, but The Spy soon discovered that, in fact, the game was being delayed indefinitely, with no word on who was taking up its development reins or when it would indeed see the light of day.

SERIES OF THE DAMNED

The re-emergence has come in the form of *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2*'s publisher, Paradox Interactive, being overheard by The Spy confirming that it is “looking forward to showing more in September this year”, along with The Spy going eyes-on with five new screens of the game showing some of its environments.



The Spy also overheard that Paradox has had its “heads down working on the game” and that it “remains just as dedicated to delivering a great game”. Interestingly, though, The Spy has also discovered that while Paradox is still guaranteeing all preorders for digital editions of the game, its physical edition preorders, including the game's special collector's edition, are all being refunded, as they are “no longer representative of the game”.

What's intriguing here to The Spy is that, in many respects, history is repeating itself with *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2*, as those PC gamers old enough to remember will recall that the original *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* also famously had a troubled development and was released in one of the most buggy states of any game ever made.

How Paradox has been controlling the development of *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2*'s during the past few years remains a mystery, but The Spy knows that PC gamers the world over will be praying that the time has been used wisely, for there are many gaming brethren desperate to jump back into its dark world. Spy out. ■
The Spy



THE SPY
The Spy summers with Lestat de Lioncourt on Lake Como.

THE GAP



19.10.2023

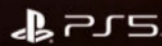
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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



WIZARDRY'S LEGACY

Over 40 years old, the **WIZARDRY** series is still kicking

The name *Wizardry* still carries weight, which is probably why the recent announcement of *Eternal Crypt: Wizardry BC* – a blockchain-based clicker game and NFT platform – went down like a lead balloon. A sad sign of the times, perhaps, but a good excuse to talk with Robert and Norman Sirotek, the brothers behind Sir-Tech, publisher of the most influential RPGs of the 1980s.

It's hard to imagine a world without *Wizardry*. The first game, *Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord*, released in 1981 for the Apple II before being ported to almost every platform of its era, is one of the key foundational works of the medium. Even in its original form it's intuitive, accessible and (to anyone who's played a dungeon crawler) immediately familiar.

Wizardry had players roll a party of six adventurers and send them into a deadly grid-map labyrinth full of monsters, traps and the occasional puzzle. While there was an evil wizard lurking at the bottom to defeat, that RPG grind for XP, gold and gear was the core appeal. *Wizardry* pioneered a lot of what's now standard in both western and Japanese RPGs: parties, distinct battle screens, characters able to change class as they levelled up, spells following a simple naming structure.

I asked the Siroteks what defined *Wizardry* for them and what sets it aside from its peers of the time. They, in turn, quoted 'digital antiquarian' Jimmy Maher on the series, "For all its legendary difficulty, *Wizardry* requires no deductive or inductive brilliance or leaps of logical (or illogical) reasoning. It rewards patience, a willingness to experiment and learn from mistakes, attention to detail, and a dedication to doing things the right way." That intuitive appeal led to *Wizardry* catching the eye of some of Japan's earliest games distributors, but Sir-Tech was adamant that it wanted to retain creative control.

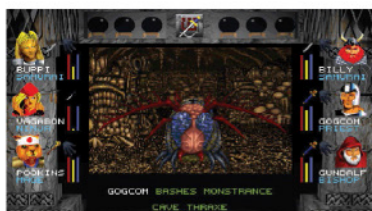
"We've got to give ASCII a lot of credit, but part of the reason why we did so well in Japan is when they came to us, they said, 'We want to market it and we want to license it,' and we said, 'No, we want to control it. We want to be in control of our own destiny, so why don't we do a distribution deal?'" says Norman Sirotek. "They agreed, and we had to deliver them the finished product in a box, shrink-wrapped and ready to go. We flew our developers out to Japan and they spent six or seven months there, converting it to about seven different computers."

Sticking to its guns is likely what gave earlier *Wizardry* games such a strong identity worldwide. Sir-Tech's core *Wizardry* games are split up into two distinct series: the original five are pure dungeon crawls where characters are expendable but free to be ported between games.



The anime

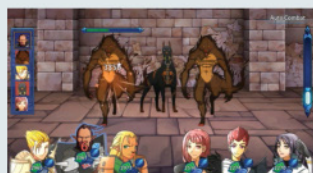
One of the more interesting projects to spring from *Wizardry*'s international licensing was a one-shot anime adaptation produced by Shochiku Fuji and released in 1991. It's passably animated, but pleasantly authentic to the first game, following a vaguely amoral, treasure-hungry adventuring party through the ninth and tenth levels of the original dungeon, culminating in a showdown with the wizard Werdna.



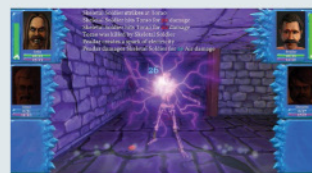
SIDE DUNGEONS *Four games that stay true to the Wizardry formula*



POTATO FLOWERS IN FULL BLOOM
Three-character parties, complex multi-elevation dungeons and surprisingly tactical combat.



INFINITE ADVENTURES
This one's beefy: six-character parties, randomly generated maps and complex character progression.



HEROES OF A BROKEN LAND 2
Still in Early Access. As well as Wiz-esque dungeoneering, there's a strategic town-building world map layer to master.



STARCRAWLERS
Wizardry! In! Space! Four-character parties with much more intricate missions and combat.

Wizardry 4: The Return of Werdna is the awkward middle child. Brutally hard, but interesting because it cast players as the original's evil wizard antagonist. Players assembled teams of monsters to fight against NPC heroes reportedly based on player data recovered from discs sent into Sir-Tech. It was also the first in the series (and one of the first games ever) with multiple endings, including good and evil routes, plus a well hidden secret ending that demanded deep knowledge of kabbalistic lore to uncover.

ASCII NICELY

Japanese publisher ASCII would go on to make new games under the *Wizardry* brand through the PlayStation 2 era before selling on the license. Back in the west, *Wizardry 6* through *8* became more complex and story-driven. With a science-fantasy setting created by new director/designer David W Bradley, space travel, furries and cosmic gods defined the tone, far from *Wizardry's* D&D-lite roots. While Bradley was the key figure credited for the first two (released in 1990 and 1992 respectively), the ambitious finale wouldn't surface until 2001, helmed by Linda Currie and Brenda Romero (Braithewaite, at the time), two now-highly influential women in the industry who started out running the *Wizardry* phone hint-line in the early '80s.

With *Wizardry 8* intended to be the final game in the series, Sir-Tech once more turned to Japan to keep the brand alive, selling the trademark and the rights to the later games. The buyer was a major player in Japanese online gaming, but the *Wizardry* brand wasn't turning as

many heads as it hoped. The rights were sold again, and licensed out to various parties over the years. A Japanese company called Drecom bought the IP in 2020, bringing us to the blockchain proposition that went over about as well as a curdled milk chugging contest. But there is some hope for *Wizardry's* future – or maybe more accurately, its past. The Siroteks still have the license for the first five games, and there are plans in motion to use it. At the very least, it sounds like they'll be going in a different direction than Drecom.

SPACE TRAVEL, FURRIES AND COSMIC GODS DEFINED THE TONE

"It's really their choice, and not a matter for me to cast judgment on," Robert Sirotek says diplomatically. "But we have our own designs and directions for *Wizardry*. Specifically *Wizardry 1-5*, and we plan to stay true to our roots and keep it authentic. If Drecom wants to go down that road, more power to them, but it's not where we want to go with it."

Despite *Wizardry's* stagnation, fans of the genre it defined are eating good. The PC has been blessed by the remastered *Etrian Odyssey* series, the excellent *Underrunners: Labyrinth of Yomi* and the overwhelmingly systems-driven *Labyrinth of Galleria: The Moon Society* in just the last two years. If building a party of expendable fools to die in dungeons is your thing, you're spoilt for choice. Whether or not the *Wizardry* brand is revived (or someone drags it to the temple for a cheap resurrection) almost feels beside the point. But it sounds like *Wizardry's* original masters are gearing up to venture into the dungeon once again. ■

Dominic Tarason

TOP MIDDLE: *Wizardry 8* was vastly more mechanically complex than its predecessors, but still feels like part of the series.

TOP RIGHT: The *Wizardry* manual's art set the tone: adventuring is a cartoonish profession where death is an inconvenience.

Secret Level

THE UNSUNG HEROES OF DEVELOPMENT

TRAILER SWIFT

Freelance video editor **JAMES MCGREGOR** on making a good videogame trailer

James McGregor got his start in video editing when, as a member of Rooster Teeth's Achievement Hunter community, he became a part-time contractor managing and moderating their community video submissions. This helped him develop his editing style which, in turn, led to a professional job within the game industry itself.

Eventually, a job opening for junior video editor at Team 17 caught his eye. "I was looking for something more permanent rather than pipeline contract work," he explains, "so I thought, I don't have any *real* past experience, but I'll apply." One fake trailer for a nonexistent *Overcooked* DLC and two interviews later, McGregor had landed the job. This involved tasks such as B-roll generation, screenshot capture... and trailer creation and editing. Today he's freelance, helping a variety of developers and publishers produce trailers for their games. But how does that work come his way?

"The majority of the work comes through from referrals," he explains. "There are a lot of freelance trailer editors. And if I've got too much on my plate, I'll recommend someone else, and so on." There's also information sharing that saves a lot of work, with heads up given on things like a company logo change which will affect multiple people. It's a competitive community, but a friendly one nonetheless.

Making trailers isn't just about stitching footage together in a pleasing way. For McGregor, at least, it also means capturing that footage yourself.

He'll play through a game in its entirety to not only find and capture the best footage, but to get a feel for the game itself, and how best to express its qualities in a trailer. And also play around within the engine to create bespoke footage, blurring the line between developer and video editor.

VIDEO STARS

Client briefs can vary as much as the games themselves, from vague and generalised to exacting, lengthy instructions listing in great detail precisely what the developer or publisher wants. "I tend to prefer [something] down the middle; because then it gives me some creative

freedom, but also gives me direction on what they want."

As McGregor notes, many people watch trailers with the sound off, but the music is nonetheless a crucial consideration for anybody listening. "I feel like that's the driving flow of the trailer, the consistent thing," he says. "Unless your trailer's a one-shot trailer, the music's going to be the one thing that doesn't change throughout. You're going to be changing, cutting, zooming, panning and so on." The music is an essential mood setter.

"One of my first stages is I will take the music, put it in my timeline, and just put text slates on what I want to show. No footage, no gameplay. And it's kind of blocking out the trailer before there's anything there."

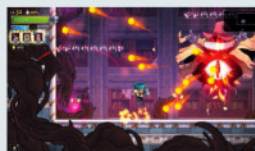
And the ideal trailer length? For McGregor, short is sweet. "I typically say the beauty spot for the length of the trailer is 60 to 90 seconds," he says. "I usually say to a dev or publisher when I'm first starting, 'Give me two weeks.' The first week is mainly learning the game, capturing any problems that we come across with a build, or if something needs to be changed. And then the second week will be the actual editing."

Although McGregor uses development skills to help him create trailers, he's keen to dispel the myth that experience is essential. "I got into it by making YouTube videos in my spare time," he explains. "You don't need to have all this other knowledge for engines and stuff. A lot of the devs – in indie games, anyway – they're friendly, and they want to help. At the end of the day, you're making something for someone, and it's their passion project." ■

Luke Kemp

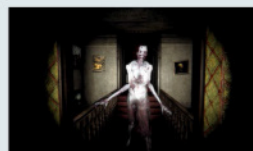
PLAY IT FORWARD

Four games James has made trailers for



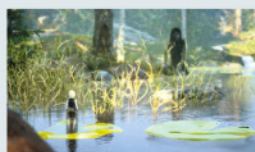
ROGUE LEGACY 2

A huge fan of the first game, McGregor was thrilled to make almost all of the sequel's trailers.



DEVOUR

His first time making a trailer for a horror game. "This was more of a cinematic approach."



BRAMBLE: THE MOUNTAIN KING

That varied Olle's Story trailer? We have McGregor to thank.



NOBODY SAVES THE WORLD

McGregor worked with Drinkbox to produce the announcement trailer for its adventure game.



CLIENT BRIEFS CAN VARY AS MUCH AS THE GAMES THEMSELVES

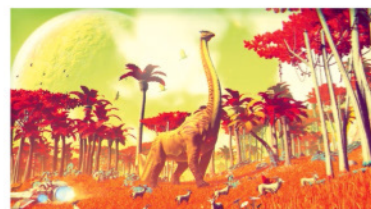


Well over a decade later, many people still remember *Gears of War*'s Mad World trailer.



ABOVE: *Cyberpunk 2077*'s original trailer back in 2013 didn't quite match what was released...

LEFT: *Dead Island*'s reveal trailer was controversial, but it certainly succeeded in attracting attention.



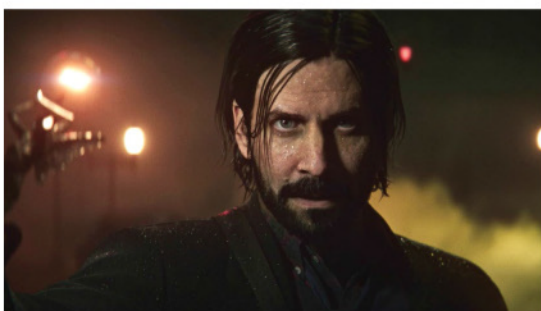
1 month



ASSASSIN'S CREED: MIRAGE

RELEASE October 12, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft Montreal

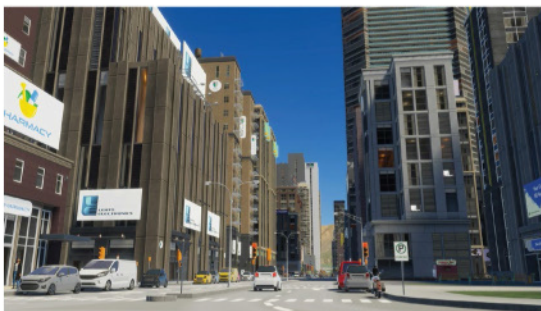
The series returns to its roots, with a stealth-orientated game taking you back to ninth-century Baghdad. You play as thief-turned-assassin Basim.



ALAN WAKE 2

RELEASE October 17, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Remedy Entertainment

The long-awaited sequel promises more survival and psychological horrors, rejoining the story 13 years after Alan Wake went missing.



CITIES: SKYLINES 2

RELEASE October 24, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Colossal Order Ltd

The much-anticipated sequel to arguably the best city building sandbox ever created arrives in late October. Create a thriving metropolis from the ground up.

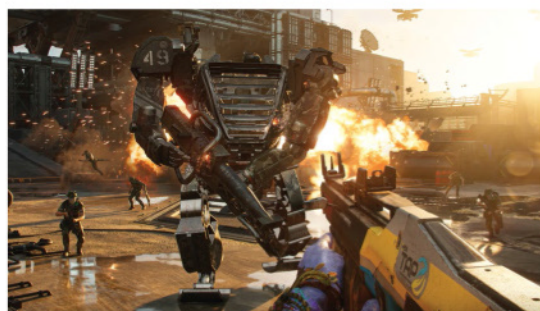
3 months



LIKE A DRAGON GAIDEN

RELEASE November 8, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio

Just when he thought he was out of the Yukaza life, Kazuma Kiryu is dragged back in to conflict by a mysterious figure. Hot new action JRPG incoming.



AVATAR: FRONTIERS OF PANDORA

RELEASE December 7, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Massive Entertainment

With *Far Cry*-style first-person combat as well as third-person adventuring and beast-riding, this open world action adventure is going big.



WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2

RELEASE 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Saber Interactive

It's time to grab your chainsword and thunder hammer, and get rending and crushing orks, tyranids and more. Action-packed sequel incoming winter 2023.

6 months



PALWORLD

RELEASE January, 2024 | PUBLISHER Pocketpair

A multiplayer, open-world survival crafting game in which players befriend and collect mysterious creatures called "Pal". Yes, it's *Pokémon* for PC gamers!



HOMEWORLD 3

RELEASE February, 2024 | PUBLISHER Blackbird Interactive

The new game in the classic sci-fi series has slipped out of 2023 into 2024, but still promises to deliver a stunning space-based RTS.



SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

RELEASE February 2, 2023 | PUBLISHER Rocksteady Studios

After a one-year release date slip, the action-adventure third-person shooter is set to deliver co-op cape-killing capers. Can the *Batman: Arkham City* studio deliver?

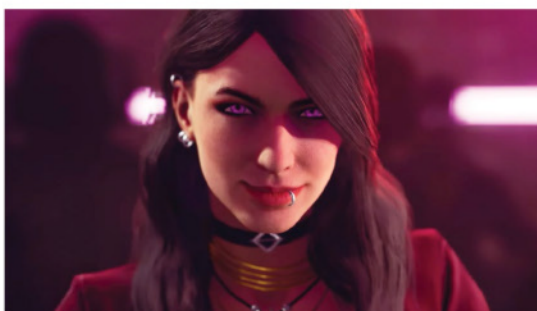
12 months+



ARK 2

RELEASE Unknown | PUBLISHER Studio Wildcard

The *Ark* series returns with Vin Diesel-voiced hero Santiago attempting to protect his daughter, Meeka, while surviving in a world dominated by dinosaurs.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE Unknown | PUBLISHER Paradox Interactive

With its original developer binned off in 2021, the current state of *Bloodlines 2* remains a mystery. Will we see the RPG return from the dead in the next 12 months?



DEATH STRANDING 2

RELEASE Unknown | PUBLISHER Kojima Productions

The sequel to Hideo Kojima's critically acclaimed action adventure game/walking simulator *Death Stranding* is incoming, but with no fixed release date so far.

PARTY TIME

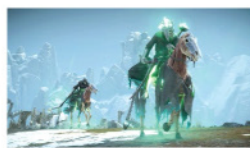
MOD MADNESS

Like *Baldur's Gate III* but wish you could have a larger party like in the original two games in the series? Well, thanks to the handy new mod Party Limit Begone, you now can, with up to eight adventures unlocked once installed. You can grab the mod at Nexus Mods right now: shorturl.at/FHMNX





Warhammer Age of Sigmar: Realms of Ruin



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
November 17

DEVELOPER
Frontier Developments

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
aosrealmsofruin.com

WARHAMMER AOS: REALMS OF RUIN

Understanding the spirit of Frontier's new RTS

In Shyish, the Realm of Death, Nagash the Great Necromancer moulds the souls of the deceased into his personal army. Cursed with new forms that reflect their mortal sins, he creates endless hosts of wailing, suffering spirits known as the Nighthaunt. And then he sends them all to capture my bloody control points.

When this real-time strategy game set in the mythic fantasy world of Warhammer Age of Sigmar was announced, only two of the game's four factions were revealed: the shining warriors of the Stormcast Eternals, and the vicious, swamp-dwelling Orruk Kruleboyz. As I play through two of the game's campaign missions, I get to meet a third – and it's not a friendly introduction. As I attempt to hold three objectives – the bases of spectral chains I need to break to retrieve a powerful artefact – the Nighthaunt throw themselves at my heroic Stormcast in relentless waves.

This seems to be what, at its core, *Realms of Ruin* is all about: objective control. Though the two campaign missions I play are quite different conceptually – one, pushing into Orruk-controlled territory, the other holding out against the aforementioned barrage of ghosts – they both essentially come down to seizing and holding ground against repeated enemy attacks. With little in the way of base-building or economy management, beyond being able to plop one of a limited set of

structures on points you control, the focus isn't on how you make your armies, it's on how you use them to dominate.

The result, at least in these campaign missions, is a feeling of constantly putting out fires. You can only have so many troops on the field at any given time, and to divide them across every point is to spread them too thin. But any point left undefended is vulnerable – if you don't have some backup standing ready to swoop over to it, it'll soon be lost. There's a constant ebb and flow of battle – your goal is to make sure it surges in your favour more often than against you.

The result is a lot of real tension in these missions. The enemy keeps you under pressure – you can never just rest on your laurels or turtle up against invasion. But where in most RTS games, that would make it a gruelling test of your speed and micromanagement skills, *Realms of Ruin's* slower pace puts the focus on your tactical choices above all. It can take quite a long time for a unit to get from one end of the map to another, or between two vital points. That goes double for the hulking, heavily-armoured Stormcast. That means you have plenty of time to choose who's going where when the alarm goes up that a point is under threat – but it also means you'd better have made the right choice, because if you haven't, pivoting isn't going to be quick or easy.

PLAYED
IT

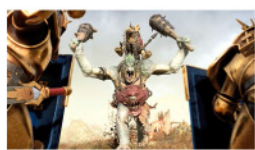
GHOST OF A CHANCE

I'll be the first to admit I'm no expert when it comes to RTS games. I've been playing them since *Warcraft II*, but I've never been any good at them – a fact made abundantly clear when the game's PR has to jump in mid-mission to offer some desperate tips for my stalemate against the undead. But despite my blunders, it's clear that *Realms of Ruin* is much more accessible than you'd usually expect from the genre. With a modest number of units to control, and the time to really consider where they were needed at any given moment, I never felt like the hole in my strategy was just not being able to click fast enough or not knowing the exact right order of commands to execute.

That suits the feel of Warhammer Age of Sigmar – both the very deliberate play of the tabletop game, but also the tone of

**THE FOCUS ISN'T ON HOW
YOU MAKE YOUR ARMIES,
IT'S ON HOW YOU USE THEM**

Warhammer Age of Sigmar: Realms of Ruin



☞ the setting. Where the more widely known Warhammer Fantasy and Warhammer 40,000 setting emphasise grim futility, in Age of Sigmar, the light of hope burns in the darkness. The actions of small groups of heroes – or horrors – can change the course of history, and it certainly feels that way in *Realms of Ruin* when a handful of troops, deployed decisively at the perfect moment, hold the line just long enough to win you the game.

Authenticity is a key aim for *Realms of Ruin*. Though Age of Sigmar may not be familiar to you as a PC player – it's one of Warhammer creator Games Workshop's newest settings, launched after the official demise of Warhammer Fantasy – Frontier Developments has clearly gone to great pains to be as faithful to the setting as possible. The chunky little units look like they walked straight off a wargamer's shelf, the battlefields look like art from an army book, and I even spotted trees that evoke specific Warhammer terrain sets.

My hands-on gives me some more time with another key part of that equation: the story. Leading into my two missions are cutscenes following the Stormcast Eternals and a wizard ally as they search for an artefact of power in the swamps of the Realm of Beasts. As the characters exposit and banter, the dialogue is earnest and a little cheesy – and honestly, that feels like the right approach. Such a big, wild setting doesn't need to be undercut with a quip or a knowing remark, and melodrama fits the fantasy better than fine nuance would.

As soon as the wizard starts sinisterly talking about harnessing power and delving into arcane ruins, you might as well stamp 'I'm going to turn evil later' on his forehead, but though the characters aren't subtle, they are likeable – particularly the Stormcast leaders, who, though they make look like fantasy Space Marines, have far more personality. The company's banner bearer is a particular highlight, sounding like a mystical Jason Statham as he points out that exploring the spooky ancient ruins might not be the best idea. Simple leads also allow plenty of space for efficient exposition, getting newcomers up to speed on the Mortal

Realms in a way that will still feel true to the source material for die-hard Age of Sigmar fans.

HAMMER TIME

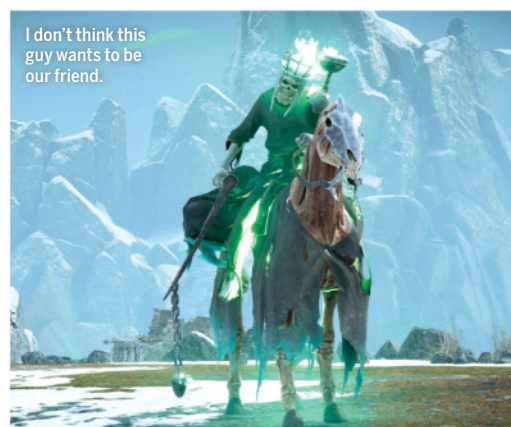
That authenticity certainly extends to the Nighthaunt, too. Though I don't get to play them myself, my battle against them reveals that they're a versatile and surprisingly resilient horde, much like in the tabletop game. Far from just a crowd of generic ghosts, they're misshapen, hunched monstrosities, each distorted into a form pleasing to Nagash. From the Craventhorne Guard dragging around crossbows far too large for their wispy arms, to the huge and disgusting Mourngul that propels its legless torso around with just its gangly arms, to Awlrach the Drowner, a sinister boatman rowing his ethereal vessel across the battlefield, they're all completely charming in their horribleness – and each fill their own clear role in the faction's strategy.

As they assault my control points, I'm forced to constantly adapt. Clanking Chainrasps come at me in crowds, bogging down my more elite units – at first they're constantly slowing me down, until I'm tipped off that the Prosecutor's hammer-flinging area-of-effect attack is the perfect way to clear them out. Grimghast Reapers come in smaller numbers, but when they hit my line their scythe-swings wreak havoc – peppering them with crossbow fire from my Vanguard Raptors seems to be the best way to soften them up before the charge.

Counter-play in *Realms of Ruin* is kept pretty simple – there's an easy rock-paper-scissors mechanic that makes each of the three broad infantry types good against one type but weak against another, and it's relatively straightforward to get a sense of what each active ability is useful for (even if I needed some hints). Putting it into practice is the tricky part, especially when splitting your forces across your territory makes it difficult to have the right units in the right place.

Realms of Ruin feels like more than just a throwback to the RTS golden age. Long-time genre fans will certainly feel some nostalgia – especially those who enjoyed the *Dawn of War* games. But there's a modern vision here too, one particularly aimed at making the push and pull of war the star of the show, and making that something even newcomers to the genre can enjoy.

Robin Valentine



I don't think this guy wants to be our friend.

FRONTIER HAS CLEARLY GONE TO GREAT PAINS TO BE AS FAITHFUL TO THE SETTING



ABOVE: Just popping out to get the latest issue of PC Gamer.

LEFT: Holding back the Nighthaunt.

PREVIEW

STALKER 2: Heart of Chernobyl



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
GSC Game World

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
shorturl.at/iqFT8

STALKER 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL

Life's tough in the zone

The demo starts, and my health is already draining. Welcome to *STALKER 2*, I guess. This Gamescom, for the first time, GSC Game World's long awaited sequel is available to play – albeit just the smallest possible slice. But while the demo may be only 15 minutes long, it manages to pack in all the grim, dystopian misery a *STALKER* fan could want.

Case in point, my health. I'm unconscious in an irradiated field full of anomalies. But that isn't what's killing me off. No, my character finally opens his eyes, and I discover the culprit: a mutant dog that's been snacking on his leg. My character pulls out a gun. It jams. The dog lunges at his neck. My character struggles to hold it at bay, weakly kicking it away just far enough for it to land in a gravity anomaly.

Finally able to stand, I look around to find a stranger who's been silently watching this all unfold. He chucks me a bolt. Right, yes. The field is full of anomalies. Bolts are a *STALKER* classic – an invaluable tool for pinpointing any anomalies in your immediate area. If I throw a bolt at a gravity anomaly, it'll be briefly weakened, letting me pass.

Radiation is a factor too, which I discover as I dash past the anomaly and towards a nearby lake. My Geiger counter clicks into overdrive, and static starts to cover the screen. Not that way then. I double back and instead head over to the stranger, who advises I deliver a couple of medkits to some locals in exchange for a

safe place to go. And with that, I'm left to my own devices.

I get the sense this Gamescom build is taking it easy on me. I check my inventory and I'm well stocked with weapons and healing items. A couple of syringes later, and I'm basically good as new. Still, I'm not feeling particularly welcomed by the Zone, which is why I'm not surprised when, as I crest a nearby hill, I encounter a man who immediately opens fire.

I shoot back, taking him down with relative ease. That's when a pop-up in the corner informs me that I've failed a quest to meet some locals near a post office. He wasn't shooting at me. He was shooting at the dogs that are now charging at me.

TAKING THE CHAIR

Investigating a building, I anger some bandits who think I'm trying to reclaim their territory back for the *STALKERS*. This is a tougher fight – these guys are definitely shooting at me. I may have guns, but I'm short on ammo. The guns I'm using aren't exactly good – they kick like hell, making it hard to land bullets with militaristic precision. I'm having to use cover wisely, dodge out at opportunistic moments to scavenge ammo from a body, before diving back to safety. My healing items are depleting rapidly. Eventually, though, the last guy falls, and I find a nice stash of ammo and weapons for my trouble.

Near death experience number five arrives at the end of the demo, when the sky turns red and a broadcasting system warns of an incoming emission – a kind of deadly lightning storm. Luckily I'm near the safehouse, and thus the end of the demo, but rather than rush straight there, I stop to appreciate the effect of the sky turning apocalyptic. Elsewhere, *STALKER 2* looked good, sure, but utilitarian. It's the post-apocalypse. The buildings are concrete and rubble. The vibes are grey and dour. But here, amid the alien red glow of an emission, it feels like it's making the most of Unreal Engine 5.

Finally, regretfully, I head to the safehouse. I knock on the door, and start to collapse. The door opens and someone wearing a gas mask appears. I can feel their weary disdain as they drag me inside. Life's tough in the zone.

Phil Savage



Unreal Engine 5 is being used for the game's graphics.

RADIATION IS A FACTOR TOO, WHICH I DISCOVER AS I DASH PAST THE ANOMALY

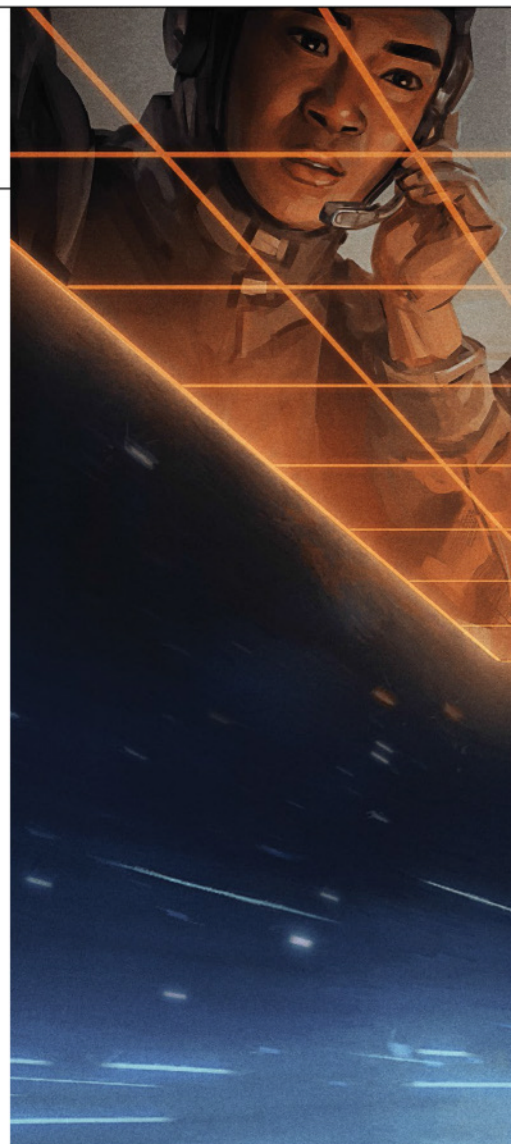
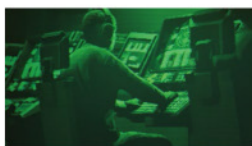
STALKER 2: Heart of Chernobyl



ABOVE: This guy didn't get his copy of PC Gamer magazine.

LEFT: Environments are expansive, but beware radiation.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

2024 in Early Access

DEVELOPER

Blackbird Interactive

PUBLISHER

Team17

LINK

earthlessgame.com

EARTHLESS

Roguelike deckbuilder journeys into space

I'm the first journalist in the world who's laid hands on the new sci-fi strategy game from the studio behind *Hardspace: Shipbreaker* and *Homeworld: Deserts of Kharak*, and I've just broken it to pieces in front of them. I'm having a great time.

Every time I preview a game that has unfinished art and narrative dead-ends scattered around like landmines, there's the potential for an awkward moment where the game flat-out breaks. The developers take control to sidestep a bug or reboot after a crash; they apologise, keep it light with some smalltalk.

Earthless, though, which is a hybrid of a roguelike deckbuilder and a grid-based strategy game, hasn't bugged out or airlocked itself straight to desktop. I've just stumbled onto a card combination that the developers clearly didn't expect, steamrolling my way to the end of a climactic boss fight before an enemy ship managed to even scratch the paint on my hull. "You should take notes, Rob," jokes *Earthless* director Hoi-Fung Ma. Apparently art director Rob Aduna had never tried what I would soon dub the Shield Meta.

THE RIGHT DRAW

Like every great deckbuilder and pretty much every roguelike, *Earthless* is at least somewhat built to be broken. Chasing the high of a magical card combo is what makes these games so replayable, and that basic pull is already here.

THE SHIELD CARDS I HAD IN MY STARTING DECK WERE KEEPING ME SAFE

PLAYED IT

Early in my run I found a card that let me overcharge my ship's shields so that they would stay up between rounds rather than resetting to zero. Then I found an artefact that granted me five bonus shields, which I affixed to the one card in my deck that cost no energy to play. Last, the pièce de résistance: an attack card that let me detonate my overcharged shields, dealing big damage to any adjacent enemy. Suddenly the shield cards I had in my starting deck were both keeping me safe and letting me pulverise the enemy to dust.

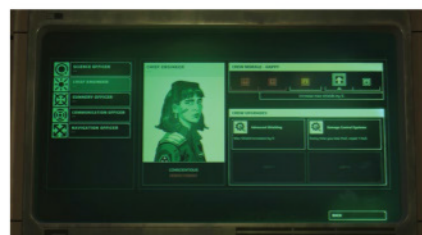
It was a satisfying first go at *Earthless*, if I ignored how much was clearly still heavily work-in-progress. The tactical grid where I position my ship is full of vaguely turd-like asteroids and alien vessels that float like lifeless lumps, animations yet to be implemented. Card art and icons need more work to clarify status effects and synergies. And this is only half of what *Earthless* hopes to be – the other half is a light narrative sim where your decisions, as captain, affect your crew and their happiness, which in turn helps or hinders you in battle. That part of the game is early and not yet deeply 'hooked in' to the card combat. But it's where *Earthless*' real potential lies.

"Right now it's the skeleton of it," says Ma. "There are a lot of interesting interactions we can already have between the moment-to-moment gameplay and the metagame systems around crew morale. But what's really important for *Earthless*, and BBI games in general, is making sure there's a sci-fi context around it, and I think that's going to be the thing that will grab people that don't tend to play these types of games."

TAKING THE CHAIR

Earthless' cards, for example, aren't meant to be abstract – they're command chips you're slotting into a terminal to direct your ship. "It's all part of that captain fantasy: immerse them into the chair and they're giving orders to their crew," says chief strategy officer Trey Smith, who's been helping Ma, a first time game director, mould what started as a prototype more than two years ago.

Aduna chimes in with some practical examples of how *Earthless* will evolve. "When you discard, the cards just kind of





ABOVE: *Earthless'* cinematic art aims for a mix of inspiration and hard sci-fi.

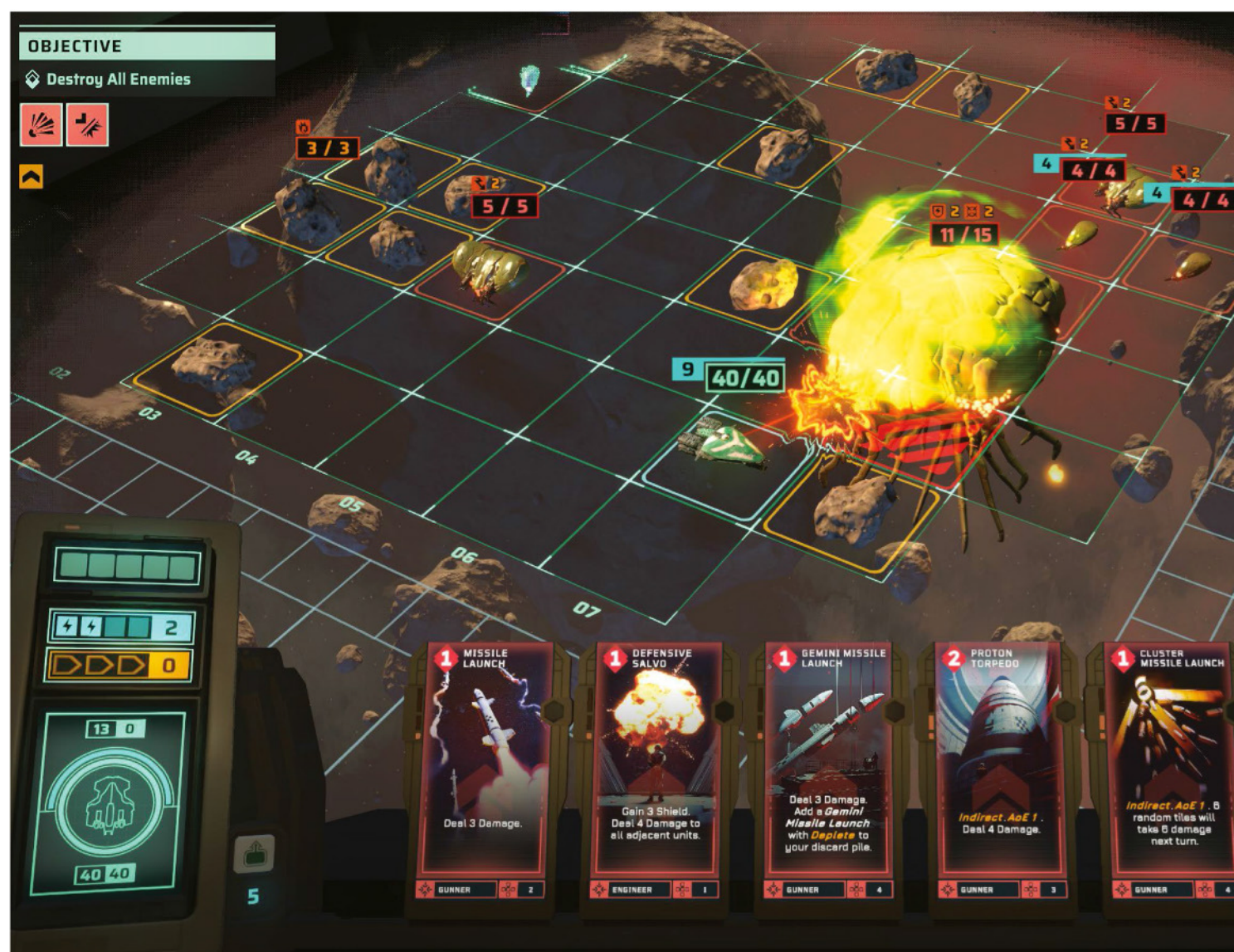
LEFT: Yellow equipment cards can augment your attacks or add new effects.

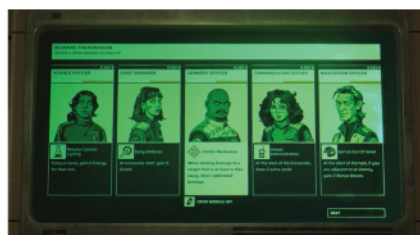
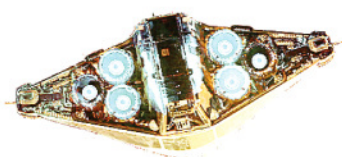
PREVIEW

Earthless

RIGHT: I want to see more of this retro sci-fi flavour make its way into the battle screen.

BELOW: Highlighting any enemy will show you what they're going to do on their turn, but enemies are adaptive. Even if you move, they may compensate to hit you.





float up on the screen to nowhere, right? Those are the kinds of things we want to solve for. Maybe it's a physical tray that comes up... we're going towards a Ron Cobb, very retro-futuristic vibe that has a grounded nature to it, and we feel that starting to solidify."

Right now *Earthless* follows a structure familiar from *Slay the Spire* or *FTL*, where you progress across a galaxy map peppered with nodes that represent battles or little narrative moments. At the end of each map there's a boss like the one I shield-stomped; cross three star maps and you'll complete a run. The narrative nodes can reward you with resources or artefacts, but also complicate relationships with your crew based on their personality traits. I ran into one event where I had to choose how careful to be with the cryotubes of some of my ship's passengers, with the more cautious choice netting me resources but displeasing one of my officers.

"Eventually we want it to be a lot more complex in terms of chaining events, so that your reactions to certain events will have consequences later in the level," says Ma. The moral choice could pay off now but backfire later, for example, with a crisis in engineering because we diverted too much power to protect passengers.

At this stage in *Earthless*, your crew's opinions don't have much bearing on the rest of the game, but the plan is for them to chime in during battle, and maybe even add cards to your deck. "If the pilot agrees with your choices, maybe you get an extra move per turn," says Smith. "But if they're pissed off, all of a sudden you've got one less move per turn... so you've got to make a choice like, 'Do I side with this crew member who I think is an asshole just to make this extra move?'"

ZEROING IN

Blackbird is unusually forthcoming about just how many mistakes it takes to get a game right. Big pieces of *Earthless* have only recently been nailed down despite more than two years of iteration. Ma built his first prototype with physical cards and initially envisioned controlling a small fleet. But he found that tactics game players wanted to control all their units on the

board while ignoring the cards, while Magic: The Gathering players would lay down their units and then wait for things to happen rather than controlling them.

Switching to one ship helped connect those two pieces but also had its own creative dead ends. "We had the idea that we needed variety, so we needed to make a modular ship system," says Aduna. "But at the end of the day, we're playing the game and it's like... you know, it's not really doing anything. So let's make bespoke ships that have a lot of personality."

Designing engaging variety rather than procedurally generated sameness is the eternal challenge for roguelikes, and here again they learned the hard way. The first levels Ma designed had scripted events like an ambush when you reached a point on the map. "It was great for the first time, but it sucked for repetition," he says. "You already know the surprise! The philosophy changed after that, where these needed to be more like arenas. The units can change, the mutators can change, and that gives it the ability to repeat without being boring."

Even the 'captain fantasy' element only clicked into place six months ago, when someone said, "You can't be a captain unless you have a crew". It may be obvious, but it changed their perspective on the crew's personalities. "If you're a captain and you don't care about your crew, that's almost like not having a crew to begin with," Smith says. "So what are some things we can do to make you care about them? That was a big one, that decision to start playing up the crew and the roleplaying side of being a captain."

THIS IS THE RUN

Earthless' premise is that, with the destruction of our home world, humanity has sent thousands of seedships out to galaxies unknown in search of a new beginning. Each run you play will put you in command of one of those ships: a different captain, a different crew. It's a tidy bit of sci-fi theming for a roguelike, but also struck me as a fitting metaphor for the iterative process *Earthless* is still going through, on its way to an Early Access launch where it will change even more.

The version of the game I played didn't yet have what it takes to establish a new colony in a corner of space as competitive as the deckbuilding quadrant. But the right ideas are all there; *Earthless'* team seems to have worked out the star chart it needs to put the ship on the correct course. All that's left is to see it through.

Wes Fenlon

EVEN THE 'CAPTAIN FANTASY' ELEMENT ONLY CLICKED INTO PLACE SIX MONTHS AGO

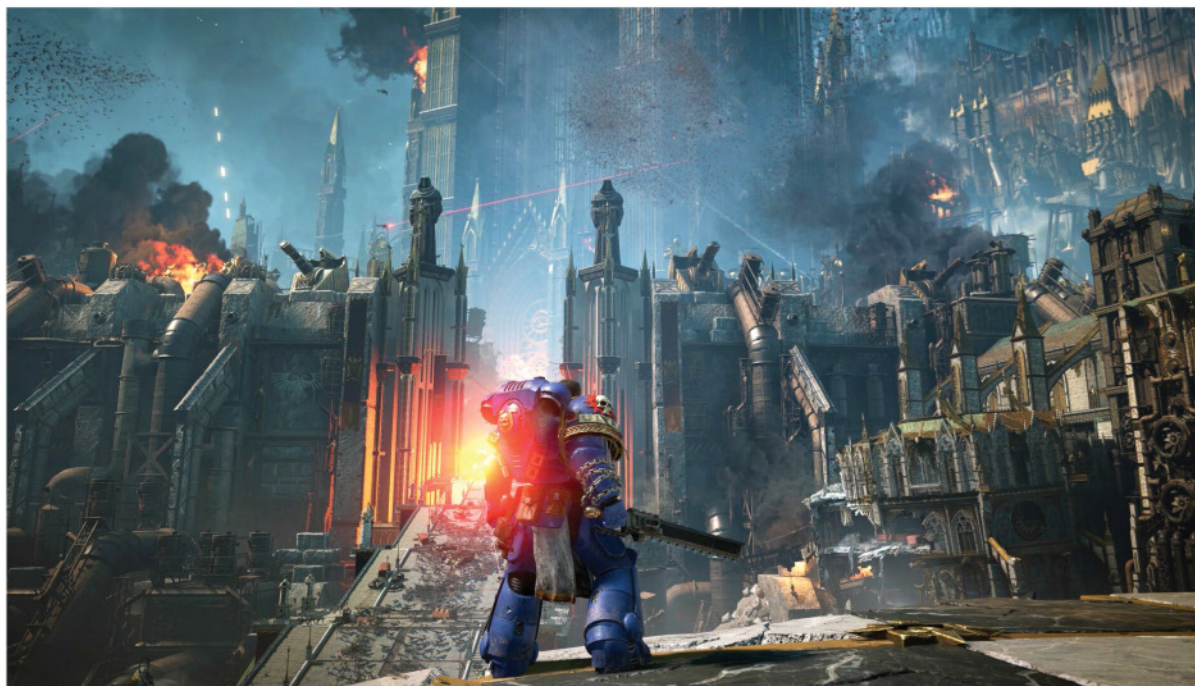
PREVIEW

Warhammer 40K: Space Marine 2

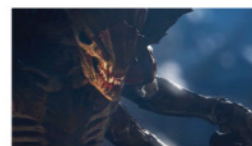


ABOVE: Taking on swarms of enemies requires some suitably large guns.

RIGHT: It's time to rip and tear with Titus' deadly chainsword.



Warhammer 40K: Space Marine 2



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2023

DEVELOPER
Saber Interactive

PUBLISHER
Focus Entertainment

LINK
shorturl.at/ehmxA

WARHAMMER 40K: SPACE MARINE 2

Chaos is winning right now, I fear

In the year 2011, men were men and the terrible affliction of 'Unreal Engine 3 Neck' raged unabated. At this time of peak Xbox, we got the original *Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine*, which paired the gothic grimdark far future of the Imperium of Man with *Gears of War*-style shooting, minus the knee-high cover everywhere.

Twelve years on, not much has changed in *Warhammer 40K: Space Marine 2*, at least going by an hour-long demo level I had the chance to sample. I never get tired of seeing those big ol' blue Ultramarine pauldrons, and we're actually pretty starved for straight-up, linear, over-the-shoulder shooter campaigns like this, but unless the full game has some serious surprises in store, it doesn't feel like *Space Marine 2* will win the favour of 2023 Ted.

First, the good: despite having to crank the graphics down to medium for a stable 60fps at 1440p on an RTX 3070, *Space Marine 2* is a treat to look at. Our big boys' armour nails that almost candy-like look of a well-painted plastic miniature impersonating metal, complete with details like skulls, scrollwork, and my favourite: mud that built up and caked my Ultramarine clodhoppers as I stomped through the demo's swampy jungles.

I was also impressed at how my tyranid foes swarmed in numbers that put the 360 original to shame, even clumping together at the base of walls to help their comrades climb over like something in

World War Z. The demo level's interior portions leaned more into 'military industrial' 40K (boo) instead of 'freaky gothic' 40K (hell yeah), but there were still some nice environment art touches like the candles, scrolls and tomes festooned about an otherwise-modern control room.

FIRING ON EMPTY

It all fell apart with the combat, though. My entire time playing, I found myself yearning for Auroch Digital's recent *Warhammer 40K: Boltgun* instead.

They're setting out to be very different shooters, but *Boltgun* nails the Space Marine fantasy of being an angry silverback in power armour. I still felt like a gorilla in *Space Marine 2*, but maybe one already half-sedated by a tranq dart after a toddler tumbled into his enclosure.

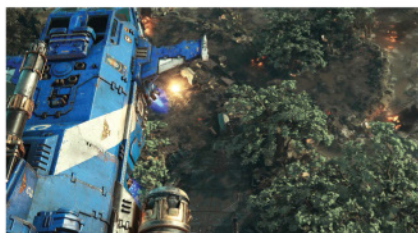
Titus just doesn't feel responsive, launching into slow, lumbering combos with his chainsword that I can't cancel out of when it's time for an *Arkham*-style omnidirectional parry. The counter windows are blessedly generous, but I'd be hammering the left bumper to counter as Titus worked through a pirouette strike with his chainsword, a successful riposte far from guaranteed.

The weapons don't carry that oomph for me either – these feel like assault rifles and submachine guns and not bolters, and I think they could do with deeper, punchier audio and more dramatic enemy reactions to getting hit. I was also disappointed by the chainsword, which rather than ripping and tearing would smack against tyranids like a pool noodle. There's just no chew to it.

With the shooting failing to carry the day for me, the demo's linear sequence of horde battles proved both dull and frustrating. At the second-highest difficulty level, I couldn't even turn my brain off and just let the violence machine go brrrrrrr– big boy tyranids take quite a bit of punishment to down, and getting overwhelmed meant an irritating wait for one of my squad buddies to get me back in action. The sheer spectacle of all those tyranids on-screen at once is the only part of the 40K fantasy that *Space Marine 2* is really nailing at the moment, but it's just not enough to carry the experience for me right now.

Ted Litchfield

THESE FEEL LIKE ASSAULT
RIFLES AND SUBMACHINE
GUNS AND NOT BOLTERS



The detailing on Ultramarines is impressive.



Lords of the Fallen



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

October 13, 2023

DEVELOPER

Hexworks

PUBLISHER

CI Games

LINK

lordsofthefallen.com

LORDS OF THE FALLEN

World-hopping glow-up

A lot of studios have tried to jury-rig their own-brand *Dark Souls*. I'm happy to report that, after four hours with *Lords of the Fallen*'s 2023 reboot, Hexworks' new take doesn't try to reinvent the wheel. Instead, its devs are building a custom ride using a tried-and-true frame, with a big hunk of weird Umbral nitrous strapped to its engine.

Lords of the Fallen has a troubled past. Its namesake, a 2014 attempt at the *Souls*-like genre, was viewed by some gamers to be a hollow imitation of the real thing – the first outsider to take a stab at cashing in on the surprise successes of *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls*.

The ghosts of double-A jank and accusations of being a rip-off have loomed over its release, and I imagine my response to news of a remake was the same as many others, "Huh, really? *Lords of the Fallen*? OK, but why not start afresh with a new IP?" But the folks at CI Games and Hexworks know their history, and after spending some time with *Lords of the Fallen*, I think they're far from doomed to repeat it.

"[*Lords of the Fallen* 2014's] world was very linear, very horizontal, you had no underlying features, you had no accessibility, so you were just dropped in it, period," explains Colin Gilzean, global product manager at CI Games, during my pre-preview briefing, before promising the remake was a step into a modernised era.

I wasn't surprised by this self-awareness – it'd be strange if they didn't

talk about it. What blindsided me during my playthrough was just how much they clearly meant it. When I hear phrases like "two lives, two worlds", the cynical goblin in my brain wakes up, ready to cry gimmick. But I'll be damned – I think they've gone ahead and pulled it off.

Lords of the Fallen has two versions of its game world: Axiom, the land of the living, and Umbral, the land of the dead. If you die in Axiom, you go to Umbral, and if you die in Umbral, you die for good. Umbral isn't just Axiom with a blue filter – it's a realm with its own mechanics.

UNDER MY UMBRAL-ELLA

You can open a window to the Umbral whenever you want by lifting up your lantern. You can then choose to step through, or you can simply keep it held up to interact with its geography in a limited capacity. For example, if a gate's broken in the Umbral, you can keep your lantern held and mosey on through while remaining in Axiom.

While exploring Mournstead, I saw a platform past a gap too wide to jump. Then I lifted the lantern, revealing a bridge of bone and flesh in the Umbral. "Surely this won't work," I said to myself, keeping the lantern pointed straight at the ground as I shuffled across. When I put the lantern away, I dropped down onto the platform back in Axiom, neat!

The four hours I played were filled with nuggets like this – the Umbral isn't just a second life, it's an alternate reality that you're constantly engaging with. It feels completely interwoven – but according to creative director Cezar Vitosu, things weren't this seamless until halfway through development.

"From the get-go, we had the lamp as the catalyst to interact with the Umbral world," he says. "However, the concept of raising the lamp to look into the parallel realm came halfway through development, when our talented designers did a small prototype on their own time. The moment we saw that lamp raising and inundating the screen with Umbral hellscape, the penny dropped. It was the missing link."

Mournstead wouldn't be half as compelling to explore if I didn't feel constantly drawn between two mirror

PLAYED IT

IF YOU DIE IN AXIOM, YOU GO TO UMBRAL, IF YOU DIE IN UMBRAL, YOU DIE FOR GOOD



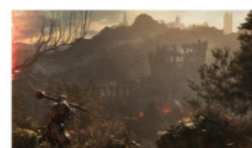
PREVIEW

Lords of the Fallen

RIGHT: Shall we dance?

BELOW: Yes, you can parry this thing.





dimensions. The Umbral isn't just a nifty exploration mechanic, though – it's an alien ecosystem and it hates you.

The Umbral's teeth are far sharper than Axiom's – enemy placement is harsh, and the game populates it with dozens of husks. These things follow slow-moving zombie rules: in isolation they're nearly harmless, but when there's five of them shambling towards you in an enclosed space, with an even deadlier enemy taking swings at you? That's when they'll get you.

The Umbral also has an awareness meter in the form of a creepy little eye. The longer you spend there, the deadlier its enemies get – eventually summoning an apex predator to ambush you. This changed my priorities, encouraging me to make a mad dash to Axiom, forcing me to weigh which fights I needed to finish and which I could dodge-roll past.

Virtosu explains the team's design philosophy when it came to crafting this sense of dread, "The player – while being an Umbral revenant so to speak – is still a trespasser, with their life-essence awakening slumbering horrors. [The Umbral] needed to be a place of fear, a place you can exist momentarily, like holding your breath underwater."

Axiom plays like a very competent *Souls*-like, but the Umbral plays like something else entirely. If I was forced to do an entirely Umbral playthrough, I think I'd pull my hair out – it's cruel, capricious, and innately hostile. I felt like a virus in the bloodstream of some Lovecraftian god, only ever existing on borrowed time while its white blood cells sought me out.

Having to dip into the Umbral – holding your breath underwater, as Virtosu put it – made the back and forth between the familiar and the alien stupidly compelling. It pairs with Axiom like a fine wine.

BREAD AND BUTTER

The Umbral adds an entirely new dimension to a formula we've grown comfortable with – but getting that formula right was still important, and it's doing nifty stuff there, too.

Movement-wise, you can still build the fat-rolling giant dad of your dreams, but the default pace is nice and quick. I was able to game invincibility frames with a

backstep, or get out of dodge with a full roll – and when I started sprinting, my lantern-bearer hauled ass.

That's another lesson learned from the past for Hexworks, as Virtosu tells me, "The overwhelming amount of feedback that the first game received vis-à-vis locomotion and combat in general ... while we still offer the fantasy of the slow indomitable tank with impactful weapons, for the light and medium levels of encumbrance, movement and evasion are much more responsive."

One of two bosses I fought – Pieta, She of Blessed Renewal – felt like a proper guide to the games' focus on timed blocks, ranged attacks and posture-breaking. I had a back-and-forth dance with her that echoed some of my favourite brawls in FromSoftware's rogues gallery – Artorias, Genichiro, Hoarah Loux – albeit with a focus on positioning, like seeing an old friend with a new haircut.

This feeling continued into the rest of my preview time. The second boss, a horrible mass of writhing limbs at the bottom of a swamp, felt bog standard – until I realised I needed to lift up my lantern to Hoover up an Umbral parasite like a Ghostbuster. Or, after dying and going to the Umbral proper, I could just run up and hit it. It's all very familiar, but with enough newness to rekindle that old flame.

Lords of the Fallen has a history, sure – but what I saw in these four hours isn't some cynical cash-grab designed to ride the coattails of a gaming giant. Instead I was treated to a confident spin on a set of old mechanics, self-assured enough to mix things up while wearing its inspirations on its sleeve.

Second chances are rare in gaming – MMOs are shut down, studios are closed, and some games are killed before they get a chance to hit our hard drives. But Hexworks isn't running from the past, as Virtosu tells me: "There are nine million unique users that played the 2014 title, so we wanted to do good by them. We are very respectful of the source material, and we have absorbed it in its entirety."

"The feedback received on the combat, RPG elements, spells and biome diversity – we wanted to address it all first and foremost. Our own ambitions and desires took second and third place." Ultimately, *Lords of the Fallen* is an attempt to do better, and from the short time I've spent with it, I think Hexworks has a really solid chance of delivering.

Harvey Randall

I FELT LIKE A VIRUS IN THE BLOODSTREAM OF SOME LOVECRAFTIAN GOD

Homeworld 3



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

February 2024

DEVELOPER

Blackbird Interactive

PUBLISHER

Gearbox Publishing

LINK

homeworlduniverse.com

HOMEWORLD 3

The space RTS aims to please with its War Games mode

With *Homeworld 3*, Relic's classic space RTS looks set to join the pantheon of returning PC gaming gods. Blackbird Interactive (the new studio, helmed by many of the original *Homeworld* devs) invited me to test-drive War Games mode, one of its big new features: a roguelike-inspired PvE mode for strategists in a hurry.

While no slouch as serious competitive games, the *Homeworld* series was always carried by its grandiose vibes, surprisingly powerful storytelling and spectacular, messy space battles. If that sounds even slightly intriguing, I recommend picking up the recent *Remastered* bundle of *Homeworld 1 & 2*, plus the GOG release of *Homeworld: Emergence*, the excellent but un-remastered middle game in the series.

These are classic games, and a hard act to follow. And while I can't speak to the quality of the writing and campaign design in *Homeworld 3* (the demo only included a short tutorial and a slice of the content from the new War Games multiplayer mode), I'm very happy to say that this is unquestionably *Homeworld*. The ships look immediately familiar, but are sharply textured and the hulls smooth and rounded when zoomed in on. The sound effects are punchy and sometimes overwhelming, just as I recall.

GAMES OF WAR

While the meat and potatoes of any *Homeworld* is the story campaign,

Homeworld 3 is adding a new, third option to the mix: War Games. A PvE mode playable solo or in three-player co-op, it puts a light rogue-lite spin on the traditional co-operative 'comp stomp' format, and plays out quickly enough for a session to be done in under an hour, culminating in a 'boss' encounter against a heavy capital ship. After a few sessions, I can definitely see the appeal.

A War Games run has players picking from one of several starting fleets, and then completing a trio of small missions, each on their own map. Each map has a limited pool of resources to harvest, a random set of objectives to complete and artefacts to collect, plus continually escalating enemy spawns that will eventually overwhelm players unless they hustle. As such, it's a bit of a scramble (each map taking only 10-15 minutes) to grab the loot you can, build what forces you want and complete objectives as efficiently as possible, then hyperspace-jump into the next encounter.

While the missions aren't especially deep what I found added the most variety to a War Games run was artefacts, the strongest nod towards modern roguelike design. Each one collected gives you a randomised list of three perks to pick from. Some unlock a new unit type, others giving a bonus to a class of units, or increasing the limit of units you can command of a particular type. They're quite significant upgrades as well, defining the strategies and unit compositions I'd use each run. In co-op, each artefact collected gives each player their own pick of three options.

While just a small slice of the final product, my impression from playing War Games mode is that Blackbird have taken an 'if it's not broke, don't fix it' approach with *Homeworld 3*. Which seems wise, given how well the original games hold up, especially in their semi-recent *Remastered* incarnations. There have been a few tweaks and changes made here, but the fundamentals are familiar and accessible to a returning fan. But after 20 years, there's been a few changes made under the hood as well.

Among the unavoidable changes, the two most significant differences are how the game is calculating damage. While the classic *Homeworld* games had a layer of

PLAYED IT

THE SOUND EFFECTS ARE PUNCHY AND SOMETIMES OVERWHELMING



PREVIEW

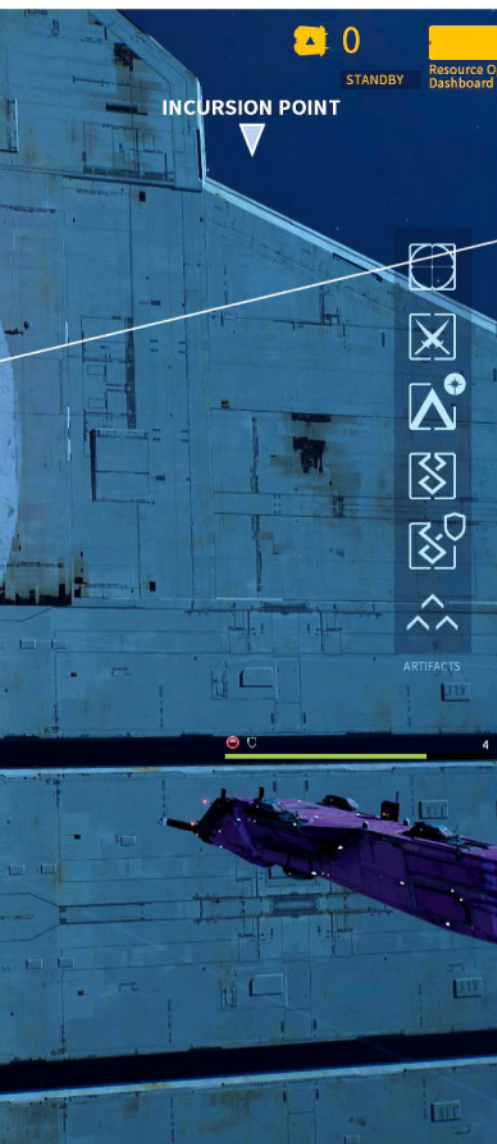
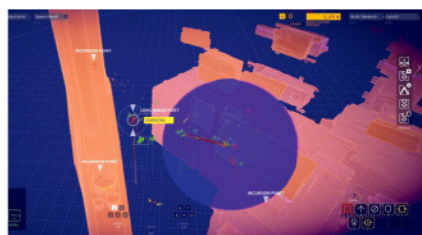
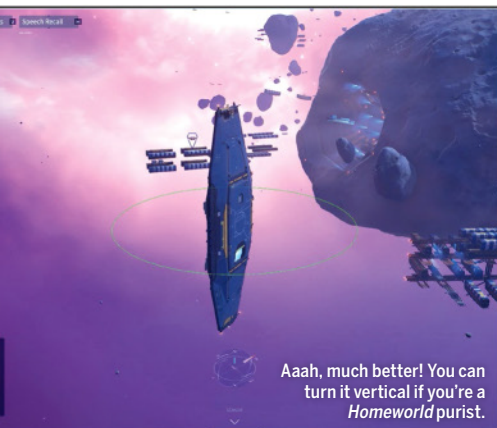
Homeworld 3

RIGHT: The new and improved Mothership design, but something seems off.

BELOW: Capture and hold these megalithic shipyards, or face endless enemies.



Homeworld 3



abstracted damage rolls behind their spectacular space dogfights, *Homeworld 3* goes the *Total Annihilation* route and tracks every projectile as a physical object, with whatever it hits taking damage on impact. It changes the dynamic of fights a little, with fighters in an evasive formation able to juke around oncoming shells, while homing missiles have an advantage. Plus, it just looks nice once you zoom the camera up close.

The other notable change is in the battlefields. *Homeworld* has historically featured spectacular starscape backdrops worthy of the best pulp sci-fi novels, often with titanic superstructures visible off in the distance, but the actual battlefields were mostly empty. While allowing for free manoeuvre, the only thing differentiating one map from another was the placement of its resource fields, the occasional gas cloud, and player start positions. *Homeworld 3* is bringing all those big backdrop elements into the foreground, and asking you to factor them into your strategies.

Homeworld 3 now officially has terrain to navigate, and I got to poke around several densely decorated maps playing the War Games demo, which had me fighting in and around the floating wrecks of impossibly huge spacecraft and stations. While many engagements played out as per *Homeworld* standard, objectives tended to be placed in interesting nooks and crannies, forcing different approaches. A target at the bottom of a deep 'valley' in the map is no problem for a wave of fighters to get to, but larger ships need to slowly lower themselves downwards, and might have trouble shooting at targets below unless their weapons are belly-mounted.

These tunnels and gaps also make long-ranged weaponry like railguns and torpedoes more situational in their usage. Sniping at the edge of radar range is all well and good when you've got a clean line of sight, but if there's a town-sized slab of metal in the way, you'll have to take a very long way around to get a nice sniper shot. While it didn't fundamentally change the experience for me (at least so far), it did add a new strategic wrinkle to a familiar formula, and I'm curious to see how

Blackbird expands on it in the campaign and PvP maps.

DIFFICULTY LEVEL

If there's one concern that I've got about *Homeworld 3* after playing the War Games mode, it's that it might not be difficult enough in this early state. I am historically bad at RTS games, despite enjoying them. *Company Of Heroes* often has me floundering to keep track of what's going on, and put me into a competitive *Starcraft* match and I will probably cry. And yet even thoroughly half-assing things, I've breezed through most of my attempts at War Games so far.

Armed with just a few fundamental rules of the genre (always attack-move, never sit on resources I could be spending on more units, and keep my forces together in a big blob so I don't have to micromanage things), my experience of War Games felt like more of a casual comp-stomp than a roguelike challenge. Enemy spawns tend to be small enough to clean up quickly before they get out of hand, and while encounters in co-op scale to the number of players, the game has yet to make me sweat in the way that past *Homeworld* games did.

While it makes for a gratifying and replayable demo experience, I do hope that the full version of this mode lets me crank up the heat a little, perhaps offering some difficulty settings. But despite the mild challenge, this feels unquestionably like *Homeworld*. It looks like *Homeworld*, it sounds like *Homeworld*. Old muscle memory reactivated almost immediately, and long-dormant neurons reignited. Even in this bite-sized format, it's a moreish strategy snack, and I cannot wait to get my teeth into the main course that is the story campaign.

One final detail revealed during the preview event was that *Homeworld 3* is going to have a full suite of mod tools at (or near) launch, plus integrated cross-store mod support courtesy of Mod.io. This means that mod releases won't be reliant on Valve's increasingly creaky Steam Workshop framework, and can be browsed and downloaded in-game no matter where you bought it from. Given *Homeworld's* long history of mods, I can see this greatly extending the game's life, even if War Games mode doesn't catch on as Blackbird are hoping.

Homeworld 3 launches early next year, with Blackbird and Gearbox currently targeting a February 2024 release.

Dominic Tarason

MY EXPERIENCE OF WAR GAMES FELT LIKE MORE OF A CASUAL COMP-STOMP



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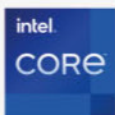
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MECH MY DAY

MECHWARRIOR 5: CLANS is bringing a narrative focus and intricate, handcrafted missions back to the storied series.

By Ted Litchfield



MechWarrior 5: Clans

M

echWarrior's Clans are weird. If the Inner Sphere constitutes the rump remains of an interstellar

Rome, then the Clans are the gene-splicing frontier techno-barbarians at the gate. Honour-bound and fanatical, the Clans have their own notion of how the Inner Sphere should be governed, and in August, 3049, they're gonna make it everybody's problem.

MechWarrior 5: Clans centres on a rookie 'Star' (a five-mech squad) from the Smoke Jaguar clan, seeing them from the end of their training to their participation in the Clan Invasion of 3049, a pivotal turning point in BattleTech tabletop lore. Like the *Shadows of the Empire* and *Yuuzhan Vong* in *Star Wars* or the *Time of Troubles* in the *Forgotten Realms*, it was one of those print-era multimedia events that pressed reset on an established fictional setting.

The BattleTech universe is supposed to be 'shades of grey', but nobody can tell me these Clan guys aren't space orcs. That's OK though, I love orcs, and the Clanners bring with them not only a "live fast, die young" ethos centred on their genetic mutations and warrior supremacy, but also the best mechs – sleeker, more customisable OmniMechs.

In contrast to the businesslike dogs of war in *MechWarrior 5: Mercenaries*, *Clans* will focus on an

almost alien warrior culture that's held itself separate from the vast body of humanity remaining in the Inner Sphere. In a throwback to the paired games of *MechWarrior*'s past, Piranha Games is following up 2019's *Mercenaries* with a partner game that approaches the battlefields of the far future in its own way.

Mercenaries delivered a galaxy full of battles to fight, with predominantly procedurally generated levels underpinning a theoretically endless private military management fantasy. "The backbone of *Mercenaries* was the procedural regeneration system," Piranha CEO Russ Bullock explains. "And you can see the star map. The dream was 'fly anywhere on that map, take missions, and fight there.'"

The developer now wants to deliver on a bespoke, handcrafted *MechWarrior* campaign, and make *MechWarrior 5: Clans* a companion to *Mercenaries* that doesn't simply drop in a new roster of bipedal tanks. After visiting Piranha HQ in Vancouver and talking to some of the passionate developers there, nearly every one of whom cited a lifelong love of BattleTech and *MechWarrior* stretching back past PC classics like *MechWarrior 2* and into the mists of the tabletop era, I've got a feeling those 'freebirth scum' in the Inner Sphere won't know what hit them.

TIP OF THE SPEAR

I played an early mission from *Clans* set on Santander, a pirate-controlled world on the edges of the Inner Sphere. In the BattleTech lore, it's

BELOW: Iglesias cites Aztec motifs as an inspiration for the Smoke Jaguar flight suits and cybernetics.



important as a point of 'first contact' (reintroduction, really) between the Clanners and the Inner Sphere. From the Inner Sphere perspective, it's this brutal awakening to an outside threat that has returned from the edge of the galaxy. And for the Smoke Jaguar clan, it's a triumphant first strike on a gaggle of bush league warlords.

Though the level was very much a work in progress, *Clans'* new direction versus *Mercenaries* was evident. Myself and four other members of a Star had to assault a fortified canyon held by Santander's ruling faction, tearing down strategic targets while fending off defenders.

The canyon is a long, open-ended level, with upper and lower paths, switchbacks, and opportunities for ambush – for both you and the enemy. My first time through, I was flanked by four developers from Piranha controlling the rest of my Star – *Clans* will support up to five-player co-op, increased from *Mercenaries'* four. There's even a lore explanation for that: Inner Sphere militaries organise their





WITH THE DEVS BACKING ME UP, I MADE IT THROUGH THE SANTANDER TRENCH RUN SMOOTHLY

units into four-mech 'Lances', while the Clanners' advanced tech and superior warrior instincts allow them to count up to five.

The core, modern *MechWarrior* combat remains intact here, with the layers of armour and substructure translating to long times-to-kill on most mechs and demanding careful

engagement with the series' location-based damage system. Management of your heat build-up is still front and centre, with powerful energy weapons generating more heat than good old fashioned bullets and missiles. And as in most sBattleTech games, different environments will contribute to how

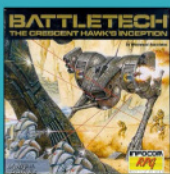
ABOVE: Your Star arrives in style aboard this Smoke Jaguar Broadsword.

quickly you build up and dissipate heat – ballistics have an all new set of advantages dropping into a volcanic environment as opposed to a temperate grassland.

With the devs backing me up, I made it through the Santander trench run smoothly, and for my next attempt I went in as the sole human ➤

KEY MECHWARRIOR GAMES

From '88 to 3095, how did we get here?



BATTLETECH: THE CRESCENT HAWK'S INCEPTION 1988, WESTWOOD

The first videogame adaptation of BattleTech, by the folks who made *Command & Conquer*.



MECHWARRIOR 1 1989, DYNAMIX

The first time we saw the mechs from the pilot's view. A landmark title that influenced many further mech games. Sold well and got a sequel.



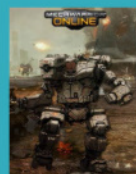
MECHWARRIOR 2 1995, ACTIVISION

The Big One. Bundled with every 3D accelerator card in the late '90s, it firmly established *MechWarrior* as a PC legend. Improved on everything from the OG.



MECH COMMANDER 1998, FASA

Underrated BattleTech RTS where you fight against the Smoke Jaguars, our protagonists in *Clans*. Worth digging out if you're a fan.



MECHWARRIOR ONLINE 2013, PIRANHA GAMES

The long-awaited multiplayer revitalisation of the series 13 years after it got put on ice.



MECHWARRIOR 5: MERCENARIES 2019, PIRANHA GAMES

The first single-player *MechWarrior* in almost 20 years, a galactic mercenary sandbox.

PLANETS WILL HAVE MULTIPLE STORY MISSIONS ASSOCIATED WITH THEM

➤ player, directing my Star with a surprisingly detailed list of squad commands. You get an assortment of tactical options for each individual member of your crew as well as the group as a whole, but just like with every RTS, my preferred strategy here was 'select all and attack'.

This iteration of the assault on Santander was a much more fly-by-night affair, but by god, I still pulled it off, even after suffering two full dismemberments myself. The pirates shot off one of my arm cannons pretty early on, a severe firepower impediment, but the loss of one leg was way worse and entirely my fault. I was having a little too much fun with my mech's jump jets, you see, and this is a game with fall damage.

After landing my 75-ton Timberwolf on my bum leg a few too many times, the old girl gave up the ghost. Switching to a third-person view, my ride wasn't looking so hot. CEO Bullock is very proud of how Piranha has been able to represent the progressive destruction of both

ABOVE: Nice operation you got here, be a shame if someone were to... step on it.

mechs and environments, and both were on full display as I limped through Santander. Hobbling on, my poor Timberwolf was also missing an arm. Meanwhile, bulldozing through the pirates' flimsy little buildings let me peek through

to their structures and interiors as their rooftops crumbled away at waist height. Destruction feels good in this game.

The graphical commitment to my miserable lemon of a mech, as well as the sheer difficulty increase as I lost

THE CLANS

Genetically engineered invaders are just like us, sort of



CLAN SMOKE JAGUAR

Aggressive, savage, and warrior-supremacist – like fighter pilots in designer genes – Smoke Jaguar is your home-town faction in *Clans*.



CLAN WOLF

Into honour and tradition more than your average mech-samurai, Wolf lets their members have a lot of personal freedom. Darn cool clan emblem, too.



CLAN JADE FALCON

Unlike many other Clans, Jade Falcon are proponents of mixed arms, not placing mechs on a pedestal above vehicles and other weapons of war.



CLAN GHOST BEAR

Regarded as patient and cautious, they also get together once a year to hunt bears with spears. Win the clan naming competition comfortably too.



functionality, made successfully completing my mission the second time all the sweeter. As I just barely cleared the final enemy mechs and gently feathered my jump jets to descend to an evac point down in the canyon, I felt like one of those characters in Wacky Races skidding across the finish line on their bum while holding a detached steering wheel. Hey, a win's a win, and I can worry about mech repair when I'm playing *Clans* on my home PC.

ALIEN VISTAS

Santander already looks good, with red rocky cliffs contrasting against a clear blue sky like something out of the American Southwest. The pirates' harsh industrial installations and gleaming white satellite dishes seal the deal of selling this utilitarian, militarised place, but it's still distinctly Earth-like at the moment. That's subject to change, according to Piranha art director Dennis de Koning.

De Koning wants the final version of Santander to be defined

BELOW: Piranha is dabbling in more advanced motion capture for its digital actors.

by veins of opalescent blue crystal running through the rock faces of the world, using subsurface scattering tech to sell this vision of dreamlike, multicoloured alien canyons hijacked for petty frontier warfare. That notion of spiking the familiar (a rocky canyon) with the bizarre (opalescent veins of alien crystal) is de Koning's go-to for selling the otherworldly vistas of the Inner Sphere. "The first thing I try to do is to ground [these environments] in reality," he tells me, adding that "the best lie is laced with truth". The artist mentioned, only half joking, that he has "a reference file of weird rock formations" to draw on for inspiration, hoping to avoid overused touchstones (badum tish) like the popular columnar basalt formation (see: *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, *Skyrim*, *Final Fantasy XV*).

In *Mercenaries*, Piranha focused on travelling anywhere in the Inner Sphere with the fantasy supported by procedural generation tools for both environments and missions. *Clans'* more authored experience will have a limited number of worlds, but you'll go a bit deeper on each of them: planets will have multiple story missions associated with them, all with a new level of focus and polish in their design. That's a big part of why de Koning and his team have to nail the look of these planets: the veined, opalescent rocks and massive desert geoglyphs of Santander will have to unify several missions under the same aesthetic and really sell the alternate reality of this world.

I was particularly taken with de Koning and his team's concepts

for Luthien, the capital world of *Clans'* antagonist faction, the Draconis Combine. The faction has drawn on Imperial Japanese influences since the tabletop days, and Piranha is crafting towering megacities reminiscent of Akira for us to do battle in. De Koning described one level on Luthien as being set among the sprawling acreage of the faction leaders' royal gardens, with colossal torii gates towering over the mechs doing battle in the once-pristine green space.

On the opposite side of the conflict, de Koning was particularly keen to show off the Smoke Jaguar homeworld of Huntress. *MechWarrior 5: Clans* will be leaning into lore descriptions of the planet having a number of jungle and tropical biomes, with missions taking place under dense tree canopies or even in a great swamp. Although de Koning pointed to the floating islands and other more fantastical elements of Avatar as what he's hoping to avoid with *MechWarrior's* environments, I couldn't help but notice a distinct Pandora twang to all this megaflora cut by cascading waterfalls and the sleek, advanced military hardware crashing through.

HAND CRAFTED

In conversation with Piranha design director Paul Inouye, I learn how these alien worlds will play host to some of the most intricate mission design Piranha has done to date, with a focus on surprising, handcrafted content. This isn't entirely new territory for Piranha, with the studio already having moved in this direction with



MechWarrior 5: Clans

► *MechWarrior 5: Mercenaries'* various DLC expansions.

Inouye seems thrilled at the level design possibilities on offer with a game that isn't shooting for the sheer number of planets as *Mercenaries*. He describes haggling with the project's programmers and engineers, wanting to have the tools to craft the most minute story beats and NPC interactions in-mission. "It's about bringing that control back into the level designers hands," Inouye tells me. "Being able to tell stories with intent, to be able to focus down on what you want the player to experience."

While the devs I talk to acknowledged there are advantages to procedural generation for making certain kinds of games, they all seem excited about returning to something more bespoke. Inouye is especially keen on being able to have, as ordinary as it may sound, "actual visual storytelling in a level now". *Mercenaries'* proc gen system largely precluded Inouye's team being able to do things like crafted sight lines, vistas, showing players a specific shot at a specific time (think the Reaper taking off in *Mass Effect's* opening mission, or your first view of the Citadel in *Half-Life 2*). Inouye even recalls "working on Mercs, and just saying, 'Hey, can we move this rock over here to change the sight line?' The answer was 'no' because if you do that the rock will move in all these other procedural generation tiles."

One of the most exciting things I hear on the entire trip, though, was Inouye's description of a later-game

mission, and the sort of non-standard levels he wants to put in *Clans*. "There are ships that are trying to leave this airbase, and you're only there to monitor them for any sort of contraband, basically you're a border cop now."

In the proposed mission, players have to scan departing ships for contraband, allowing cleared vehicles to pass unmolested but opening fire at the first sign of smugglers. It doesn't end there either, with Inouye telling me that players then have to investigate the crash site they created and secure the contraband.

To me, this sounds like the kind of small gameplay moment that might make *Clans* feel more than a non-stop slugfest between mechs. My mind went to *Metal Gear Solid V* and that one simultaneously beautiful and awful mission where you have to intercept tank convoys rolling in from all across the map. Tranq darting and crouch walking gets replaced with frantic horseback riding, trap setting, and Fulton Recovery System antics, and Inouye's out-there proposed mission has me excited to get that same sense of panicked, delightful surprise out of *Clans*. This is a different kind of mission, your comfortable strategies don't work here, figure it out.

INDUSTRIAL DESIGN

The mechs themselves remain as core to the experience as ever, and the process of creating them begins with Piranha concept artist Alex Iglesias. Iglesias' more grounded, industrial takes on classic BattleTech

BELOW: Property values in this Draconis city are about to plummet.



designs have won praise from the community, and even come full-circle to influence the modern tabletop game. Revisiting the Clan mechs, though, is a major undertaking – these models have decades of history to live up to, a fraught history of copyright issues with series like *Robotech* to avoid (but that's another story), and some notable differences from the chassis we saw in *Mercenaries*.

According to Iglesias, "Clan and Inner Sphere have different tech bases, with the Clanners usually being the climax – typically higher performance, higher tech, more advanced. Their stuff is usually lighter, it shoots faster." For a real-world touchstone, Iglesias points to the contrast between the rugged, old-fashioned, higher-calibre materiel of the Soviet Union and the sleeker, more elegant designs adopted by NATO during the Cold War.

The Clan mechs also possess fundamental mechanical differences that have proven challenging to Piranha from both an artistic and



DON'T THE CLAN MECHS JUST KINDA SEEM... BETTER THAN THEIR INNER SPHERE COUNTERPARTS?

design perspective. The Clans' OmniMechs are inherently more modular than their Inner Sphere counterparts, letting players swap out their limbs and associated 'hardpoints' or weapon mounting locations. While a typical mech might be limited to a large energy weapon mounting point on a limb, a Clan

mech could swap that limb out for one that supports a large ballistic weapon, or maybe two smaller energy weapons.

Don't the Clan mechs just kinda seem... better than their Inner Sphere counterparts? The fact that their loadouts and roles can be changed up so easily has proven difficult enough

ABOVE: Concept of Santander with more of that "opalescent rock" on display.

to balance, especially in a multiplayer game like Piranha's *MechWarrior Online*, but it's also a huge aesthetic challenge for Iglesias and Piranha's other artists, 2D and 3D.

The mechs always have to look the part, and the same weapon – Iglesias and de Koning used a missile battery as an example – might have to be remodelled any number of times to look just right on each individual mech. Luckily, Iglesias comes to the process with a lifelong love of BattleTech and takes no end of joy in reinterpreting the original FASA Corporation tabletop designs.

SOUND OFF

Piranha principal audio designer Sean Kolton is in charge of a crucial piece of the *MechWarrior 5: Clans* puzzle: the unique sci-fi soundscape of the battlefield of the future. "Mechs are funny," Kolton tells me, "because you don't have any in the real world to [base the sound on]."

We've got tanks and excavators and all manner of horrific war machines, but these real-world

MECHS OF THE CLANS

Some chassis we expect to see



TIMBERWOLF

The Timberwolf's hulking digitigrade legs and egg-torso give it the most iconic clan mech silhouette you should be afraid to shake a stick at.



MAD DOG

Reminiscent of an Apache attack helicopter, the Mad Dog looks like a hawkish predatory bird with the power to level city blocks. Deadly in packs.



SUMMONER

Looking goofy with an offset cockpit and a giant barrel full of missiles on one shoulder, the Summoner is still the clan mech bread-and-butter.



DIRE WOLF

The massive Dire Wolf looks more like a bunker with legs than any other mech, and with its staggering firepower the comparison is scarily accurate.



THERE'S NOT QUITE ANYTHING ELSE IN GAMING LIKE THE MUTED THUD OF YOUR FOOTSTEPS



WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO MAKE A MECH?

Creation timeline

CONCEPT PHASE

A new mech starts with a concept from artist Alex Iglesias, adapting one of the original tabletop designs into something that fits Piranha's direction for the series.
Time: 3-4 weeks

SCULPTING

Piranha's 3D and texture artists then create the in-game asset, including cockpit, camo variations, and battle damage. Piranha will reuse animations from similarly-sized mechs when possible.
Time: 11 weeks

QUALITY ASSURANCE

Next comes implementation in the game and various QA passes. The feel of a mech trumps everything, even the "realism" of this fictional world.
Total Time: 3-4 months for one mech.



» analogues are still far from the bipedal war-fighting platform of the 31st century, so Kolton and his team have to get creative. “It’s a mixture of the two, synthesisers and real-world sounds and a lot of processing on those real-world sounds. Even metal impacts, there aren’t a lot of real, deep, heavy metal impacts.”

When I asked him about favourite real-world samples for mech sounds, he told me about the one that got away: “I was at the beach with my son. There was a massive accident [everyone was OK!], and it was the loudest explosion sound I’ve ever actually heard. And the first thing I thought was, ‘Wow, that’s a great crack for like, an [autocannon] sound.’”

That almost obsessive dedication has resulted in a soundscape that’s uniquely *MechWarrior*. There’s not quite anything else in gaming like the muted thud of your footsteps as you stomp across a battlefield, the sound dulled ever-so-believably by your insulated cockpit and the hum of all the machinery underneath you. With *Clans*, Kolton hopes to maintain this kind of fidelity while also differentiating the Clan mechs from their grungier, less refined Inner Sphere counterparts.



LEFT: Environments in *Clans* are diverse.

ABOVE: Big stompy mechs call for big transporters.

RIGHT: Yeah, I’ll take the one on the left.



A BRIEF BATTLETECH TIMELINE

Tracking the rise of robot-based warfare

2107

The newly created K-F Drive allows interstellar travel.

2439

The first battlemech, the Mackie, is tested on Earth.

2570

After an era of war, the Star League is founded, united disparate factions.

2767

The Amaris-Kerensky Civil War begins, threatening to tear apart the Star League.

2784

Aleksandr Kerensky takes six million volunteers and leaves known space, eventually forming the Clans.

2786

The Succession Wars begin as all factions try to claim dominion.

3015

MechWarrior 5: Mercenaries is set during this period of war.

3049

The Clan Invasion begins.



“For *Clans*, I wanted to do something completely distinct at the same time. To me, the cast of the Clans and the universe is grittier, starker,” Kolton explained. “I keep on going back to those old Terminator scenes: Terminator one and two where they do the flashback, or I guess flash forward to the future of those massive battles.”

The Clan mechs are going to have a starker, cleaner sound to them to match their technology profile, and Kolton wants fans to “play the two games [*Mercenaries* and *Clans*] and have completely different audio experiences”.

That drive extends to the soundtrack as well, Kolton’s main focus this go-around. *Mercenaries’* OST is a fan favourite, with Kolton bringing his own passion as a metalhead to guitar-heavy tracks that are firmly music you can lift weights to. With *Clans*, it’s going to be more of a synths and ambient dread kind of vibe. The music on the Santander level reminded me of driving the Mako across uncharted worlds in the original *Mass Effect*, and Kolton cited the likes of John Carpenter and Nine Inch Nails as influences on where he’s taking *Clans’* soundtrack.

FORGING AHEAD

MechWarrior 5: Mercenaries was the first numbered instalment of the series in almost 20 years, a key part of a wave of new-school mech sim hits breathing new life into what was once practically a pillar of PC gaming. “Mechs might have been one of the biggest genres in gaming,” CEO Bullock muses when I ask him about the second wind the scene has found in recent years. “It hasn’t been for a while, but it’s gaining steam. I think even with what we’ve done with *MechWarrior*, we’ve seen the brand slowly get revitalised.”

“We’ve seen what Catalyst is doing with the pen and paper stuff. Now for the first time in decades, you’re seeing [BattleTech] in Target. They’re making a big resurgence. And I think that the work we’ve done over the last 10-12 years has played a big part in that resurgence.”

Clans looks set to continue that resurgence, then, bringing more refined, authored level design and storytelling, hopefully matching *Mercenaries’* sheer breadth of content with a newfound depth. I, for one, am excited to load up with a Hellbringer and aim for the legs when *MechWarrior 5: Clans* launches sometime in 2024. ■



M

PC GAMER

THE BEST MECH GAMES ON PC

From anime mecha to rusty 100-ton war machines, the best mech games for giant robot lovers

By Sean Murray, Evan Lahti, Ian Evenden

W

hether you like hardcore simulation and strategy or the explosive

thrill of mecha anime, games about big stompy robots have always had a home on PC. With the upcoming *Armored Core 6* and *MechWarrior 5: Clans* on the horizon, it's definitely a good time to be a fan of games about 100-ton death machines.

While mech games span genres, they are bound together by the simple truth that piloting suits of mechanised armour into combat is a fantasy that never gets old. It's an aesthetic that dates back decades to the very first *MechWarrior* in 1989 and now lives on in newer games like *Titanfall 2* and *Brigador*. That's why we've rounded up a diverse selection of our favourite mech games spanning multiple genres – from the traditional sim to button-mashing character action.

DON'T MAKE THE MISTAKE OF THINKING IRON BRIGADE IS YET ANOTHER TOWER DEFENCE GAME

Iron Brigade

RELEASED 2012 DEVELOPER Double Fine

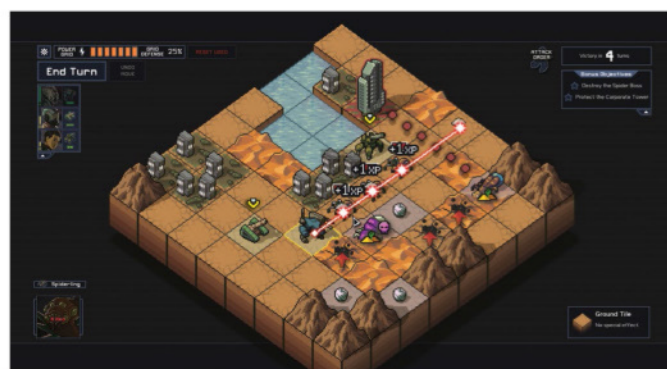
Double Fine's not-quite-a-tower-defence-game spin on mechs is one of the most unique thanks largely to its campy B-movie vibe and WWI-era aesthetic. Don't make the mistake of thinking *Iron Brigade* is yet another tower defence game where you place rows of static defences that usher waves of stupid enemies into killboxes, however. Yes, each level has you fighting off waves of aliens, and yes there are towers, but your primary defence is your hulking mech that you stomp

around in as aliens rush your defences – and it's simply a ton of fun. There's a good deal of variety to play around with too. Your mech can equip a variety of different weapons that each bring a distinctive kind of destruction to the battlefield, and there's always an upgrade to work towards in between each mission. There's a balance that you'll want to maintain as more powerful mechs mean weaker stationary tower defences. New enemy types are readily introduced as well.

MechWarrior 5: Mercenaries

RELEASED 2021 DEVELOPER Piranha Games Inc.

"**M**echWarrior is extremely back," reads our review. *Mercenaries* is a satisfying return to form from the series that popularized the mech genre back in the '80s. Mechs stomp around with appropriate weight and crunch the earth around them. As an in-cockpit mech game, it's a great companion to the more tactical view from 2018's *BattleTech* that can also be played cooperatively in story missions and one-off skirmishes.



Into the Breach: Advanced Edition

RELEASED 2018 DEVELOPER Subset Games

We've banged on enough about *Into the Breach* in this magazine to make it a game you know you have to play. It rides high in the Top 100, and if you don't mind playing it on mobile, and have a Netflix account, you can play it for free.

The *Advanced Edition* update brings new mechs, pilots and enemies to the game. Armed with little more than gigantic robotic suits, you defend human settlements from bugs.



BattleTech

RELEASED 2018 DEVELOPER Harebrained Schemes

BattleTech is a good adaptation of the mech-based tabletop game that by now has received waves of Paradox DLC. You can take the route of a story campaign or go full sandbox in Career mode, diving straight into open-ended merc company management, taking procedurally-generated contracts alongside more handcrafted Flashpoint missions that emerge as you play.

Front Mission Evolved

RELEASED 2010 DEVELOPER Double Helix Games

A major Japanese mech franchise, *Front Mission* calls its robotic suits 'wanzers', but in *Front Mission Evolved* you end up spending a chunk of the game fighting them on foot. It helps drive the plot (you use your missing father's mech suit to try and find him, but end up drafted into the army) and provides contrast with those times when you're fully armoured and heavily armed. Your wanzer is customisable, your guns very big, and the boss battles frequent.



Titanfall 2

RELEASED 2016 DEVELOPER Respawn Entertainment

Respawn Entertainment gave mech games a much-needed adrenaline shot when it released *Titanfall* in 2014, but it's *Titanfall 2* that fully realised the potential of a shooter that contrasts parkour running and gunning with slow, strategic mech combat. What came as a complete shock, however, is that

Titanfall 2's campaign turned out to be one of the best the FPS genre has seen in years.

It's a very different game to its 2014 predecessor, which is still worth looking at, but is far better. Where that game was a multiplayer shooter burdened with season passes and grinding through its levels to unlock

things, *Titanfall 2* has a proper singleplayer campaign and story alongside the online fun, which explains its longevity.

Each level is an inventive execution on a single brilliant idea, like snapping back and forth between the past and present, that binds together a surprisingly affecting story.



FEATURE

The Best Mech Games on PC

Super Robot Wars 30

RELEASED 2021 DEVELOPER Bandai Namco

Released to mark the 20th anniversary of the *Super Robot Wars* franchise, which has seen a vast number of videogames across a broad variety of platforms since 1991, *Super Robot Wars 30* is one of only four *SRW* games to be translated and released outside of Japan and the first from the main series. As a result, the finer nuances of the plot are likely to be lost, but there's still a lot to enjoy in this nostalgia-fuelled trip through mecha and kaiju history.



Daemon X Machina

RELEASED 2020 DEVELOPER Xseed Games

If you're looking for something a bit like *Armored Core* in the run-up to the release of *AC6*, but don't feel like buying a PlayStation, then this third-person shooter is worth a look. It's a much faster game, with speedy combat, but also comes with a deep mech customisation system and some bright and colourful anime-style visuals. Though as another game that's come to PC from the Switch, don't expect too much in the way of detail.



Mechwarrior Online

RELEASED 2015 DEVELOPER Piranha Games

MechWarrior Online inherited the august legacy of classic titles like *MechWarrior 2* and *MechWarrior 4: Vengeance* – both games we'd love to include in this list if they weren't so damn hard to get running on modern hardware. But make no mistake, *MechWarrior Online* is a great

mech game in its own right. It's developed by Piranha Games, the same studio that released *MechWarrior 5: Mercenaries*. The free-to-play shooter might not have a singleplayer campaign, but it captures the tense thrill of attrition-based warfare in its excellent competitive matches. Each game is a 12v12 slugfest

that ends with players earning currency and experience, and customising their rides in between rounds. While that comes with its own share of problems like a long grind and microtransactions, *MechWarrior Online* excels at capturing the slow pace of combat that made the series so revered.



THERE'S AN INTIMIDATING AMOUNT OF CUSTOMISATION AND PLAYSTYLES

Brigador

RELEASED 2016 DEVELOPER Stellar Jockeys, Gausswerks

Brigador is the rare kind of game that feels both nostalgic and refreshingly modern. Its '80s synthwave soundtrack, isometric angle, and gritty retro sci-fi aesthetic mask a brutally punishing indie roguelike that revels in chaos and destruction. When it originally launched in 2016, it was so difficult that it was actually hard to enthusiastically recommend, but the recent

Up-Armored edition smooths that curve out while adding even more mechs, pilots, and missions to an already robust game.

With over 56 mechs to pilot and 40 weapons, there's an intimidating amount of customisation and playstyles to account for. While the temptation to go in guns blazing is always present, hit-and-run guerrilla

tactics are often the better strategy. No matter how you approach combat, *Brigador* always shines in the moment-to-moment action. It's both extremely fast-paced and precise, and you'll need to choose your shots carefully even as you frantically weave down city streets avoiding fire from dozens of enemy units.



Hawken Reborn

RELEASED 2023 DEVELOPER 505 Games

Hawken was good. Like, 79% good. But it was closed down, its multiplayer servers switched off, and removed from Steam in 2018, though a fan patch is out there for a singleplayer PC game. Five years later, *Hawken Reborn* is in early access as a free-to-play PvE game. There will be co-op, naturally, but PvP is a project for the future, if it gets it at all. Such is the way of early access.

Mech Armada

RELEASED 2022 DEVELOPER Lioncode Games

Putting you in control of a whole team of custom mechs in turn-based combat with giant bugs, worms and frog-like creatures, this indie game came out of Early Access to a torrent of positive Steam reviews. The turn-based combat takes place over procedurally generated levels, forcing you to take advantage of the terrain to gain an advantage over your enemies. *Mech Armada* uses a roguelike structure, so a wipe of your team sends you back to the beginning.



Strike Suit Zero

RELEASED 2013 DEVELOPER Born Ready Games

There's an appeal to the lumbering tank-like combat of some mech games, but *Strike Suit Zero* captures the thrill of piloting an agile death machine packed with more missile launchers than the entire US Navy fleet. It's space-faring Japanese mecha at its best.

You start off piloting a fairly standard space fighter, but pretty soon come across an experimental piece of military hardware called the Strike Suit. This suit is capable of switching between fighter mode, where you to fly about space *Freelancer*-style, and giant killer robot mode where you turn into a Macross-style mecha capable of taking down clouds of enemy fighters at the touch of a button.

The first time you line up your crosshairs on some 30-plus incoming enemy fighters and let loose that wave of missiles will give you chills. It's a mech power fantasy unlike anything else. Power, agility, and flitting from objective to objective while raining death and destruction wherever you go makes you feel like a robot god. And things get even more intense when you start taking on capital ships – the miles-long battlecruisers that will make you look like a bug, but never feeling like one. Thanks to two capital-ship-busting autocannons, you can crack open that battlecruiser faster than they can shout “nani?!”

**THINGS GET EVEN MORE INTENSE
WHEN YOU START TAKING
ON CAPITAL SHIPS**

Iron Harvest

RELEASED 2020 DEVELOPER KING Art

You might be forgiven for thinking that the *Iron Harvest* is what the Iron Brigade uses to fulfil the Iron Order, but in reality it's an RTS with a hint of *Company of Heroes* about it, in which suitably primitive combat walkers help an alt-history 1920s army capture control points while belching diesel fumes. Happily, the squishy foot troops can stand up to these mechanical terrors, with snipers, cannons and even bears able to be fielded by the three sides in the game's conflict.



Pizza Titan Ultra

RELEASED 2018 DEVELOPER Breakfall

It may have come from the Switch, but it's hard not to love a game that upends the constant combat of other mech games and recasts your towering metal form as something used to deliver pizza among the tower blocks of a city. There are still some enemies to crush, but you're also picking up pie ingredients that drop from the sky as the game challenges you to keep your momentum up while hazards try to slow you down.



M.A.S.S. Builder

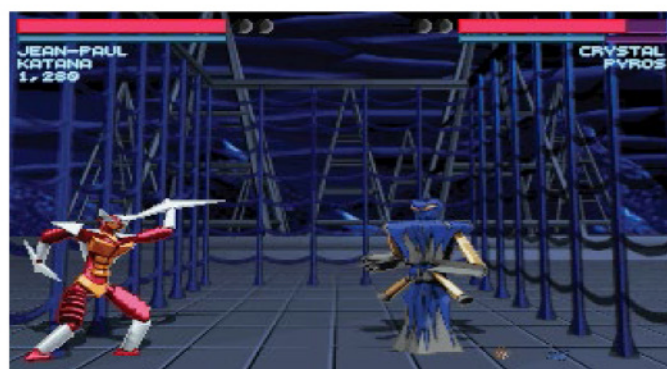
RELEASED 2019 DEVELOPER Vermillion Digital

That's Mechanical Assault Skeleton Suit, in case you thought otherwise, and despite having been around for a few years, this game is still in early access. Its mechs are of the fast-moving, flying, Japanese variety and are highly customisable. While many mech games allow you to swap out your creation's head, MASS Builder lets you change three areas of its face and the same is true all over its body.

One Must Fall 2097

RELEASED 1994 DEVELOPER Diversions Entertainment

Robots known as HARs – piloted by humans you never see via a mental link – fighting one on one in an arena filled with hazards in order to establish a base on Ganymede. A bit like *Street Fighter*, this 1994 game still managed to be better than *Rise of the Robots*, released the same year, by virtue of the fact its characters could turn round and face the other way if needed, something Mirage Technologies' beautifully rendered bots never managed.



MechCommander

RELEASED 1998 DEVELOPER FASA Interactive

BattleTech is the fantasy of being a warrior-engineer. You trade missiles and lasers with other bipedal tanks, you win or lose, and then you

head back to the drawing board to repair damage, refit weapons, reallocate armour, and rethink your all-PPC 80-tonner. *MechCommander* was the first

game in the series to add 'tactician' to that job description, and it holds up remarkably well as a real-time tactics game. Over dozens of escort, search and destroy, and scouting missions, you command as many as three lances (12 mechs) at a time, waypointing them away from explosive fuel drums and out of the range of turrets as you duel with light, medium, heavy, and assault-class enemy mechs. I love the rhythm of the combat – the plentiful gaps as mechs take a breath to reload, rotate, or take aim. In those moments, you're anticipating an arm being blown off, or whether your Raven will dodge that Gauss cannon.

While *MechCommander's* progression system for pilots is limited by modern standards, mechwarriors can permanently die, have a set of individual voice lines (the death cry of Rooster is haunting), and are charming enough. More fun is the battlefield work of trying to shave off just enough of that enemy Masakari or Thor so that you can repair it and use it in battle.



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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Bhaal's spawn

Two months ago we boldly stated that *Baldur's Gate III* was going to be the "fantasy RPG of the decade" and that "RPGs are about to be changed forever". And, as our full *Baldur's Gate III* review shows this issue, those statements were far from hyperbole. This is a monumental release in the history of PC gaming and, trust me when I say this, an experience that every PC gamer should not miss.

What Larian Studios has done with this grand old PC gaming series is truly mind-blowing, not only bringing its world back from the dead after more than 20 years, but at the same time giving birth to an entire new standard in terms of role-playing games that raises the bar massively for the entire industry. These are exciting times to be a PC gamer and, I for one, couldn't be more thrilled.

R. Jones

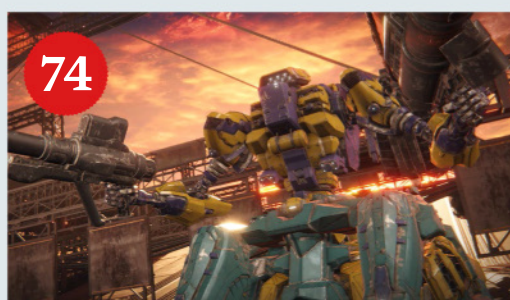
ROBERT JONES

PRINT EDITOR

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**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's Sushi-eating reviewers...



FRASER BROWN

Specialist in
Losing his life

Currently playing
Baldur's Gate III

This month
Went a little mad trying to review *BG III*. Started talking to a hamster named Boo.



ROBIN VALENTINE

Specialist in
Jumping in portals

Currently playing
Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart

This month
Summoned a freaky mushroom man to aid him in battle. You heard!



DOMINIC TARASON

Specialist in
Pirate arrrs

Currently playing
Shadow Gambit: The Cursed Crew

This month
Walked around PC Gamer Towers with a parrot on his shoulder.



RICK LANE

Specialist in
Looting while shooting

Currently playing
Remnant 2

This month
Consumed blazing hot videogame vindaloo. Then proceeded to find-a-loo. Ha ha! Pun!



MATT ELLIOTT

Specialist in
Monkey business

Currently playing
Ape Out

This month
Threw humans off very tall buildings while laughing and listening to experimental Jazz.





PURE MAGIC

BALDUR'S GATE III is a dream RPG that was worth the 23-year wait

By Fraser Brown

After spending 160 hours unravelling conspiracies, setting fire to monsters and finding increasingly fancy hats for my Bard, I can now confidently say that *Baldur's Gate III* is the greatest RPG I've ever played. If I wasn't writing this review, I'd be rolling a brand-new character and jumping in for another hundred hours. I've got it bad.

It's my dream game: the best parts of *Ultima*, *Baldur's Gate*, *Planescape: Torment*, *Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Divinity: Original Sin*. But it also does so much more than tap into the RPG greatest hits, finding a way to unite disparate philosophies like cinematic storytelling, unhinged sandbox mayhem and tabletop-style roleplaying. Yes, it says, you can have your cake and eat it too.

And boy is it absolutely massive, as deep as it is wide. Each of the three acts could be their own epic RPG, jam-packed with elaborate dungeons, strikingly memorable quests and unique stakes, supported by systems that offer a huge amount of player freedom. It is a game overflowing with crossroads, with every step conjuring up yet more paths trying to seduce you off the beaten track.

VENTURE FORTH

The opening act sees you wrestling with the revelation that you've been infected with a parasite – a tadpole – that will eventually transform you into a monstrous mind flayer, stripping away your identity and free will as you become an agent of the Grand Design, attempting to bring about a universe where everyone is an evil squid monster. But that initial shock quickly makes way for a free-wheeling wilderness adventure evocative of classic D&D escapades.

There's a druid grove in peril, goblins everywhere, a mysterious swamp and the opportunity to adopt an owlbear cub. Please do – it's adorable. It's here that you'll meet the majority of your companions, who

share your mind flayer curse, letting you fill out your party to better tackle the dangers of the Sword Coast. This is *Baldur's Gate III* at its most traditional, but even so it pushes against the familiar, using things like the lurking danger – and allure – of the tadpole to keep you on your toes. It bestows you with some of the powers of a mind flayer and encourages you to use them, manipulating your allies and enemies, with the

promise of even more exotic powers.

With each act, there's not just a change in location but a change in

Each of the three acts could be their own epic RPG

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A D&D romp through the Forgotten Realms

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Larian Studios

PUBLISHER
Larian Studios

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900k, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER
Online and local co-op for up to four players

LINK
baldursgate3.game

tone as well. Act 2 has the most dramatic turn, with its shift into pure horror, all curses and twisted monsters and traumatised NPCs. There are shades of *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne* here, laden with an oppressive atmosphere and some truly unsettling creature designs. It's a welcome but harrowing change in direction. But so much of the game's tone is down to your choices. In Act 1, for instance, you might team up with the villains of the moment, butcher all the heroes and innocents, and completely change the whole act's vibe. You might not always know what story you're writing, but you're always its author.

Horror is always waiting in the wings no matter what act you're adventuring in. Once I reached *Baldur's Gate* itself, in Act 3, I spent a good chunk of time trying to find the dismembered body parts of a murdered clown, in a quest that started off full of laughs and quickly veered into the horrific. But this urban setting also provided its own unique adventures full of political intrigue and criminal turf wars. The relentless variety of the quests feels like ten different tabletop campaigns combined, but Larian manages to keep things surprisingly cohesive.

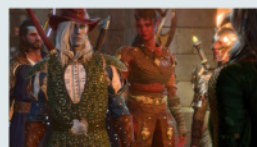
FRIENDS FOR LIFE

The epic stakes are balanced out by the multitude of very intimate, personal stories – ones that are elevated by writing that never falls into the fantasy trap of becoming stiff or stuffy. The fate of the entire world hangs in the balance, but that's very much par for the course. Larian's writers make this matter by blessing the world with a bounty of rich characters who you'll become invested in as you spend hundreds of hours getting to know them.

Even though you have a great deal of control over what happens to your companions, they have a lot more agency than your usual RPG party members, including when it comes to

BARD TO THE BONE

Why you should consider rolling a bard



THE DRIP

With their big fancy hats and bejewelled tunics, bards are undeniably the slickest looking heroes in all of Faerûn.



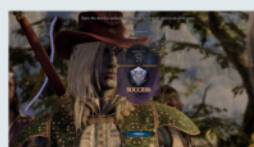
THE INSTRUMENTS

Your instrument can be used to perform flashy bardic magic, but you can also put on musical performances, netting you gold.



THE PATTERN

As a bard you get lots of unique dialogue options that often veer into the cheeky, salacious and, quite often, hilarious.



THE SKILLS

Bards are masters of persuasion and deception, while their focus on charisma and dexterity makes them well-rounded adventurers.

Baldur's Gate III

romance, where they're usually the ones to instigate the change in your relationship. They have arguments and disagreements and agendas that are at odds with each other. And they never feel like they're just playing a supporting role. Their personal quests – each chock full of tragedy and conflict – are inextricably linked to the main quest, and every companion is treated as just as important as the player character. It's their story just as much as it's yours. Indeed, you can optionally play the entire game from their perspective, selecting them as an 'origin character' during character creation – though I recommend a custom character for your first playthrough.

One of my highlights was simply going on a cheesy date at a frankly terrible restaurant with Karlach, the tiefling barbarian whose supernatural might is fuelled by an Infernal Engine in her chest. A quiet, incredibly sweet moment between intensely violent fights against gods and demons and mind flayers. *Baldur's Gate III* is a very horny game, but it can also be genuinely romantic and nuanced. The relationships you encounter, both sexual and platonic, are complex, believable things, and miraculously manage to feel grounded even when magical WMDs, affairs with deities and pacts with devils are involved.

ANYTHING GOES

Baldur's Gate III fully embraces the flexible nature of D&D, turning it into

an immersive sim where, if you can imagine it, you can probably do it. Every quest, puzzle and combat encounter has a ridiculous number of ways for you to tackle it, rewarding creativity at all times. Every time I thought, "It will never let me do this," I was proven wrong, with no cheesy tactic or exploitative loophole

deemed out of bounds.

Spells, skills and physical manipulation of the world around you opens up so many doors, literally and metaphorically. You can make a fight against a trio of ogres go your way by smashing the

rickety pillars holding up the building they're hanging out in, turn into a gas to sneak your way through tiny cracks in a wall, or use magic to persuade animals to turn on their masters. You might never talk to a single squirrel, but every animal in this humongous game has dialogue. You can read minds, talk to the dead, create disguises, turn invisible and teleport yourself and allies across large distances, and these tricks can be used time and time again rather than just as one-off novelties.

As a dungeon master, developer Larian Studios is very permissive, though occasionally brutal. Experimentation is encouraged, but mistakes often lead to death. And this flexibility works both ways, with enemies also able to take advantage of your dirty tricks. So while you might be able to knock back a strength potion and push a boss off a cliff, ending an elaborate fight before it even starts, your whole party can

also be knocked into oblivion. Just watch out for those sudden drops.

HIGH ROLLER

The spirit of D&D has been captured not just by *Baldur's Gate III's* flexibility, but by its love of dice rolls as well. As you explore the world, passive rolls will be made against your perception skill, to determine if you've noticed a trap, a potential ambush or some buried treasure. Thankfully, even if your player character misses something, the rest of your party might be more alert.

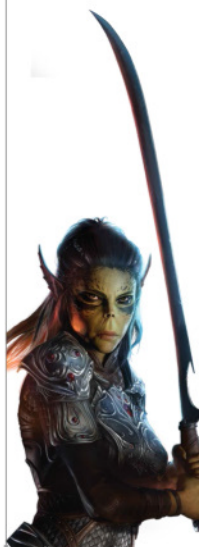
You'll be doing a lot of manual rolls, too, like when you're trying to pick a lock, disarm a trap, or just in conversation. The skills you get when you select your class and background constantly crop up, emphasising your earliest choices and encouraging you to roleplay. Sometimes you'll get unique dialogue options that don't require any rolls – as a bard I often get to crack jokes or spit out the occasional bit of poetry – but when I try to persuade or deceive someone, the dice come out. The mechanic is pleasingly tactile, and I've never felt so tense about making conversation choices before. It's brilliant and stressful and I'm no longer certain I can make decisions in my own life without dice now.

RNG can be a bit of a pain in the arse, true, but *Baldur's Gate III* sidesteps some of the pitfalls inherent in systems that employ so much randomness by giving you plenty of ways to augment your rolls. Spells, potions and proficiency bonuses can be applied to bump the number up, with your companions lending a hand too. It always feels like you're still in control. By making choices that match your chosen background, and those of your companions, you can also get Inspiration points, letting you reroll and take another swing.

POWERGAMING

Compared to a lot of other RPGs, *Baldur's Gate III* has a fairly low level cap. Twelve levels doesn't sound like a lot, especially when you often won't actually be making any choices when you do level up. But this is less of an issue when you consider the vast amount of other ways you can develop your character.

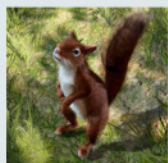
The sheer number of magical items you'll encounter in your playthrough is enough to fill every shelf in Sorcerous Sundries, Baldur's



No cheesy tactic or exploitative loophole is out of bounds

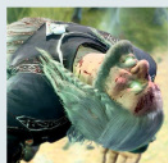
MASTER OF MAGIC

The spells every adventurer needs



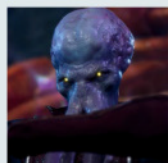
SPEAK WITH ANIMALS

Some of *Baldur's Gate III's* funniest moments are down to its critters, but you'll never know without this brilliant spell.



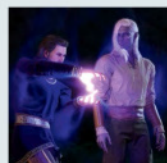
SPEAK WITH DEAD

Corpses aren't nearly as fun as animals, but sometimes the dead will have information for you, especially if you're trying to solve their murder.



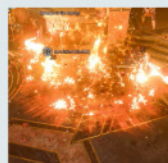
DETECT THOUGHTS

It's a bit rude to read someone's mind without permission, but you've got a world to save and no time for niceties.



COUNTERSPELL

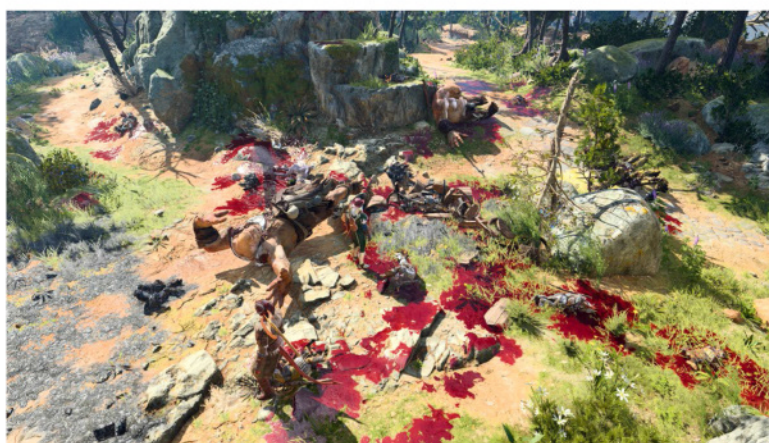
Stop enemies from murdering you with magic by neutralising their spells. This can make some of the game's toughest battles a doddle.



FIREBALL

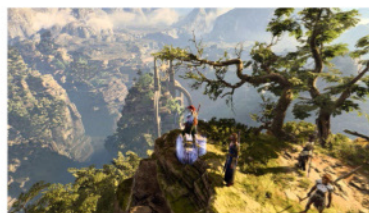
Sometimes you just want to set the world on fire. And if you do, then throwing around a few fireballs is how to do it. Seriously, they're deadly.

I carried this in my inventory for a whole day, so it must have started to pong.



FAR LEFT: Embrace your mind flayer powers and you can transform into this handsome boy.

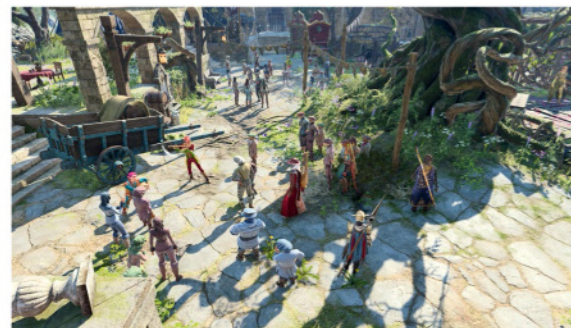
LEFT: Even during the apocalypse there's always time for smooching.



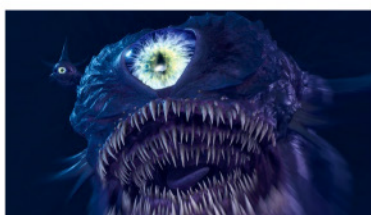
Baldur's Gate III's triumvirate of arseholes.



Jaheira is one of several returning pals from the old games.



RIGHT: This is why Underdark dentists are all billionaires.



FAR RIGHT: Date night with my favourite beardy wizard.



There's nothing more vain than a vampire who still owns a mirror.

Gate's premier magical shop, a hundred times over. And many of them give you new spells and skills, completely changing your build. After finding a lot of lightning-themed gear I turned Gale into an invincible, electricity-spewing bomb who could just walk through the battlefield spitting out death while being completely immune to the fallout. He never left my side after that.

I'm not much of a min-maxer, especially not in story-driven RPGs, but *Baldur's Gate III* makes experimenting with weird builds an absolute delight. For me it's not so much about making tiny changes to squeeze a bit more damage here or there, but rather playing around with items and spells to see what sort of mayhem I can cause. And boy is there a lot of potential for mayhem. Who needs extra levels when you can shapeshift into an owlbear, cast the Enlarge spell, and then drop onto an enemy from a great height, turning into an earth-shattering meteor?

MURDER AND MAYHEM

If it wasn't obvious from the whole owlbear meteor thing, *Baldur's Gate III*'s fights are wonderfully anarchic. It's a turn-based deal (outside of combat it's real-time by default, but with the option to switch to turn-based when you, say, want to time a sneaky infiltration of a monster-filled ruin) and is thus a bit slower than its predecessors when blood's getting spilled. It's also so much better.

Every scrap is an experimental, free-form puzzle filled to the brim

with things to be fiddled around with: terrain, props, elemental effects, even the corpses can be weaponised. If you've never murdered a devil by throwing a dead gnome at it, you haven't lived. If you want, you can even charge into battle with a sausage pilfered from a tavern kitchen. But it's a joy even when you're not

You can charge into battle with a sausage pilfered from a tavern

experimenting. Simply thwacking goblins with a big ol' sword is immensely satisfying, especially as you grow in power, going from a level 1 fighter who keeps missing their hits to a level 12 god-killer who can just keep

swinging away multiple times a turn.

Larian has made the familiar roster of D&D spells and powers impressively flexible tools, especially in the way that they interact with the battlefields themselves. Instead of just firing Melf's Acid Arrow at a gnom, you can instead fire it at the ground they're standing on, making the surface acidic. Then you can follow it up with Firebolt, which combines with the acid to create a fiery explosion. This is the system at its most basic, and as you unlock more elaborate spells things really kick off, allowing you to create AoE traps that can take out small armies.

TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS

Embarking on this adventure can be pretty daunting, granted. D&D can be impenetrable for the uninitiated, and *Baldur's Gate III* is not an easy-going introduction to its rules and quirks. Even as a *Baldur's Gate* vet who also plays tabletop RPGs, I found it quite intimidating, and a lot of folk at PCG

ended up starting the game again after 20 hours. It demands a lot of patience, then, and you might have to spend a lot of those early hours just figuring things out and muddling through. Once you've figured out D&D's eccentricities, though, you'll have a much better time.

Keeping track of characters and quests can also be a real challenge, even with the quest journal helping. Sometimes the passage of time will lock you out of certain quests, but on other occasions it won't. I spent hours trying to access a location before moving onto the second act because of a pop-up implying that I was reaching a point of no return, only to discover that the location was in a different act, and that I could still return anyway, at least until an entirely different point of no return. The best way to avoid getting caught out is by saving way more than you think you'll need to – just in case.

Given the scope and complexity, though, I honestly expected to encounter more issues. I noticed a few minor bugs and one crash, but no problems since Larian started releasing hotfixes. Performance has been similarly smooth, though with an RTX 4090 and an i9-13900K, I'd be worried if it wasn't. On Steam Deck things were more iffy, but I'll happily deal with 20-30fps if it means I can play in bed.

After reviewing a game this large, there's usually a sense of relief when I'm done. But not here. To be honest, I could have easily reached the game's climax days earlier, but I just couldn't bring myself to call it. I felt compelled to see as much as humanly possible in one playthrough because it's all just so bloody incredible.

Whenever I found a new quest to distract me, I was overjoyed. Another reason to keep playing! More of the best-in-class writing, more of these gripping fights that have seen me duking it out well into the small hours of the morning, more magical artefacts to cram into my beautiful mess of an inventory. I'm genuinely gutted that it's over. So I guess there's only one solution: start all over again. I'm buzzing with excitement. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Baldur's Gate III is an unrivalled RPG that will swallow your life whole. And that's a good thing, it really is.

97

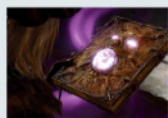
BUCKET LIST

Five things to do in the Sword Coast before you die



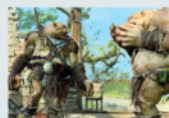
ADOPT AN OWLBEAR CUB

After you ruthlessly murder an owlbear in Act I, you can eventually adopt its cub, slightly making up for your bloodlust. It's adorable.



READ SOME WEIRD FANFIC

Did you know that brothels have libraries? Apparently they do, at least in *Baldur's Gate*, and you'll find some literature inside.



RECRUIT SOME OGRES

You'll meet some ogres in the Blighted Village, and if you can avoid becoming their dinner, you can summon them in battle.



DIG FOR TREASURE

The people of Faerûn love to bury chests everywhere. So make sure you carry a spade at all times, as you can dig them up and loot them.



WEAPONISE A GNOME

You can pick up nearly everything in *Baldur's Gate III*, and that includes gnomes, which you can then throw at your enemies.

FOILED AGAIN

EN GARDE! is a brief yet riotous piece of swashbuckling nostalgia

By Jon Bailes

In *En Garde!* 17th century Spain is slathered with a sense of nostalgia. Not for the setting itself, of course – I'm not that old – although it is an enticing reimagining, with its piñata colour palette and kitsch flamenco soundtrack. Rather, because it reminds me of Asterix books, of Dogtanian cartoons, and black and white episodes of Zorro on Sunday mornings. Of simpler times, in other words, and simpler forms of entertainment.

Playing this swashbuckling adventure, meanwhile, tickles a different memory gland. *En Garde!* is like the remaster of an early 2000s console effort that never existed, from a time when developers were figuring out how the scrolling beat-'em-up might evolve into three dimensions. Superficially, it bears a family resemblance to *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, but it's narrower in scope, more cheap and cheerful. Your charge, Adalia de Volador, is equipped with a rapier but also a barrel of wisecracks aimed as much at the genre as her arch-nemesis.

Combat is where the difference really counts, though. Adalia understands that a good action scene doesn't merely entail swordplay, but acrobatics, pratfalls and an Ikea's worth of broken furniture. As much as she'll back herself in a one-on-one duel, guards don't queue up and wait their turn. Victories are thus earned by prancing around, using what comes to hand, until your swordswomanship can come to the fore.

SURPRISE ATTACK

Like Monty Python's Spanish Inquisition, in fact, your chief weapon here is surprise. Do something stylish or unexpected and an exclamation mark pops up over nearby enemies' heads. You might then get a free hit in, or use Adalia's boot to propel them into a wall, cracking their defences more permanently. As for what causes surprise, well, quite a lot. Kick some boxes towards a group as they close

in, perhaps, or chuck a jug at one of their heads, or a lantern at something explosive, or drop a chandelier when someone's standing beneath it. Once you've bought time, duelling itself is a

clean yet tense affair. Blue attacks can be parried, red must be dodged, with each success gaining you a moment to whittle down your foe's guard.

Still, it's easier said than done, and *En Garde!* can get quite

tricky to tame. Mostly that's in the right way, with sharp rules and controls ensuring any mishaps are yours to own. An auto-lock feature

Could do with a little more substance besides the combat

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A cartoon swashbuckler in which combat is as much about showing off and using the scenery as striking your opponent.

EXPECT TO PAY

£16

DEVELOPER

Fireplace Games

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2070

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

engarde-game.com

sensibly targets the nearest aggressor unless you push towards another, while the camera is happy to hang back a little to frame the action. Busy later levels do expose occasional problems, but in the main these systems are pleasingly elegant. It helps also that there's a real sense of focus in how to play *En Garde!*, and wisely it doesn't overcomplicate the fun with levelling up, or skill trees, or combos and additional weapons.

It could do with a little more substance besides the combat, however. *The Prince of Persia* parallels also derive from Adalia's platforming acrobatics, for instance, as she swings on poles or bounces on hanging nets to cross gaps, but nothing much comes of them. Getting from A to B is never more involving than spotting the next grab point and flinging yourself in its direction. Alternatively, stronger humour may have rounded off the package. The game's silliness undoubtedly sets the right mood, but it trusts far too much in the comedic potential of exaggerated Spanish accents, and while the quips that rattle back and forth between Adalia and her foes land sporadically, more often than not, eyes will roll.

You might say that's all part of the nostalgia, but the whiff of vintage also makes *En Garde!* feel somewhat limited, a point driven home when you swashbuckle through it in under four hours, with only the prospect of doing it better to pull you back in. Fine if you want to hone your skills, but this also feels like a tacit admission that *En Garde!* has already exhausted itself. Perhaps nostalgia works best that way, though, but it's not fulfilling to live in the past. ■

RAPIER WITS

Meet the four main characters



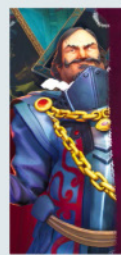
ADALIA

Our confident and cocky hero with unmatched fencing skills, a strong sense of what's right for her community and a reckless adventurer's will to match.



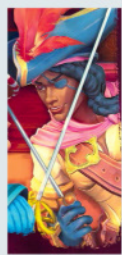
ALEJANDRO

Brother to Adalia, he fancies himself as a hero too, but lacks his sister's panache. Also bears a resemblance to the mysterious 'El Vigilante'.



COUNT DUKE

The local authority whose hobbies include raising taxes and hatching schemes to make himself even richer at the expense of the poor.



ZAIDA

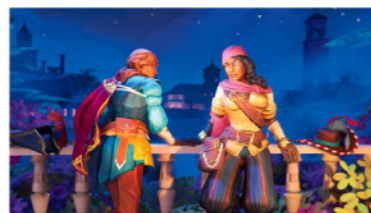
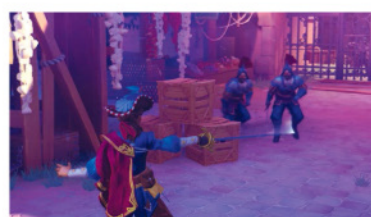
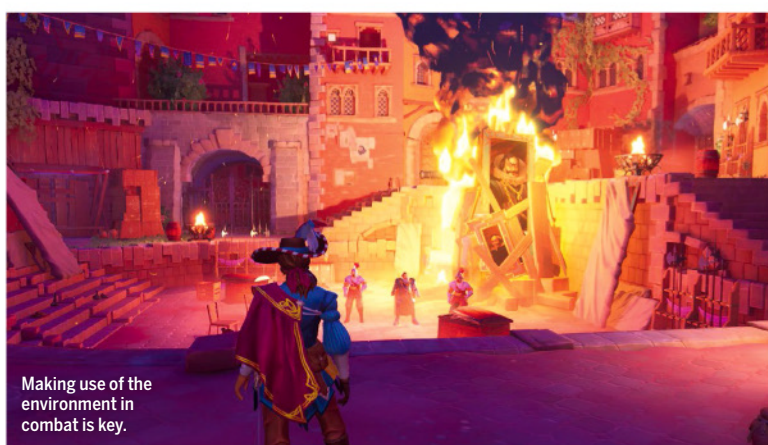
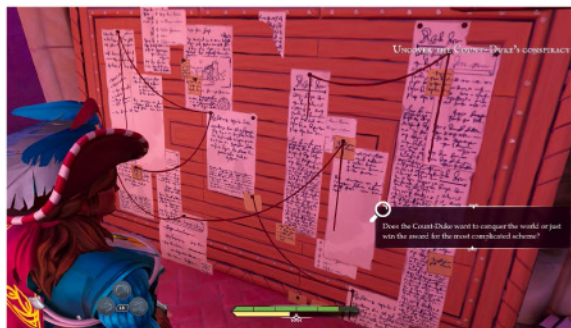
A famed outlaw who's after the count duke's fortune for her own purposes. Adalia is starstruck and enamoured by her presence, but should she be trusted?

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Fireplace Games' *En Garde!* flares brightly with its slick, slapstick combat, for a while at least.

71



ABOVE: This. Is. California!

FAR LEFT: Can Adalia figure out the truth?

LEFT: Sword play is frenetic and fun.



PIECES OF GREAT

Gunfire Games makes subverting expectations a habit in **REMNANT 2**

By Rick Lane

I am a space ninja, carving up robot sentinels on an artificial planet stranded in time. A few hours ago, I was blasting cockney elves off a dilapidated clocktower with a gun that fires cubes. Before that, I was having my life drained by a cursed boardgame in an antechamber of a vast golden palace. Oh, and let's not forget the time I chased my friend through an ancient temple as he was dragged underground by a sentient tree.

If variety is the spice of life, then *Remnant 2* is a blazing hot videogame vinaloo. It can barely go half an hour without throwing some weird mystery box at your feet, and only half the time do its contents pop out to kill you. As someone who deeply distrusts the Skinner-box feedback loops of cooperative looter-shooters, *Remnant 2* completely bypasses my cynicism about the genre. It does this by giving me exactly what I want from gaming, namely unique and exciting adventures with my pals that never rely on the numbers going up to keep me planted in my chair.

That might sound straightforward enough, but *Remnant 2* is a deceptively complex bit of game design. Everything from the bosses you encounter to the quests you embark on may be completely different from another group's

adventure, and you'll fittingly only ever see a fragment of what the game offers on a single run.

All this was true with 2019's *Remnant: From the Ashes*, and the sequel paints on a bigger canvas with finer brushes. You see lessons have been learned straightaway, in how much quicker *Remnant 2* gets to the fun stuff. Like the first game, *Remnant 2* starts out with your custom-

made character journeying across a post-apocalyptic Earth that, until recently, had been ravaged by a hostile tree-like race of creatures known as the Root. In the first game, it was a dirge of an opening that lasted several tedious hours. In the sequel, you're on Earth long enough to complete the tutorial, and that's it. Within 40 minutes, you've discovered the conclave of survivors and travelled through to a new realm.

You'll only ever see a fragment of what the game offers on a single run

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Procedurally generated looter-shooter with tough combat and a wild imagination

EXPECT TO PAY
£42

DEVELOPER
Gunfire Games

PUBLISHER
Gearbox

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX
2080 Super

MULTIPLAYER
2-3 player coop

LINK
remnantgame.com

That starting realm could be one of three. I ended up in Yaesha, a fae realm home to a race of satyr-like creatures known as the Pan. But there's an equal chance you could end up in Ne'rud. My favourite realm, however, is Losomn, a mirror-world where two reflections of a gilded palace are connected by a sprawling low-fantasy cityscape prowled by people wielding rifles and farm tools.

RECURRING LEVEL TILES

All these environments are procedurally generated, and while I spotted a few recurring level tiles on my adventure, *Remnant 2*'s maps felt unique and hand-crafted most of the time. Yet what impresses most is not how these spaces look, but how rewarding they are to explore. Each world has several 'main' areas which typically include two or three side dungeons. But every element is randomly assembled, including the adventures you'll experience. Venturing into a Losomn sewer, I met a despondent fellow who asked me to look for his wife, which meant searching through piles of bones amassed by vicious werewolf-like creatures. The clocktower I mentioned in the opening was the culmination of another quest, one that involved navigating between two separate areas to solve a puzzle. Some quests have multiple potential resolutions, while others actively seek you out, literally yanking you into a new area. All, some, or none of this could happen to you on your adventure. The blue elf lady who's been forefront of the marketing for *Remnant 2*? Never saw her. Not once.

There's a potential counter argument here, which is, "Why not let people experience everything in one go?" Well, speaking personally, I prefer a game that takes 20 hours to complete and leaves me wanting more, than one that takes 100 hours to complete and leaves me wondering how the hell I'll find the time to play it again. This approach also makes a

MAP-TASTIC

Remnant 2's map and minimap are superbly designed



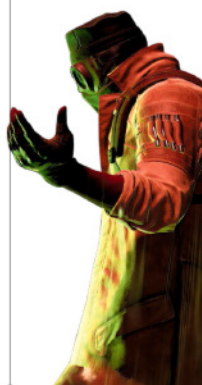
1 PATHS
Clear delineation between main and side paths.

2 3D
3D makes elevation easily comprehensible.

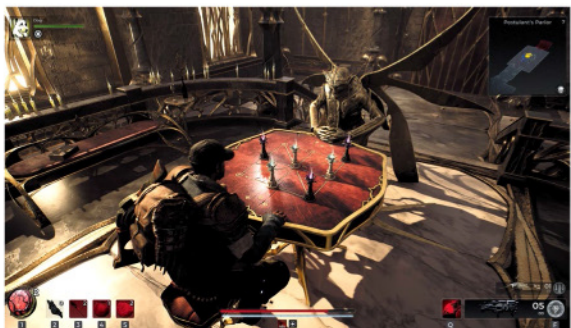
3 DEFINITION
Clear definition of pathways.

4 COLOUR
Colour-coded points of interest.

5 UNEXPLORED
Not pictured, unexplored areas are coloured red.



The best boy.

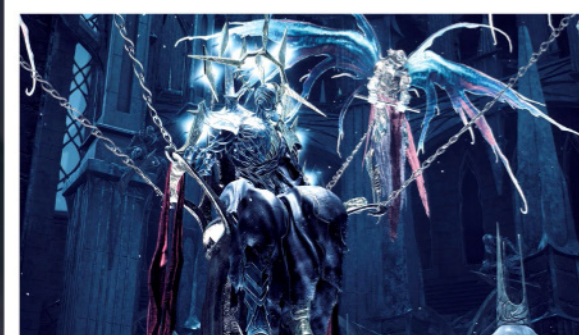


FAR LEFT: Well, at least it isn't Mousetrap.

LEFT: Weirdly, *Remnant 2* has extremely good books.

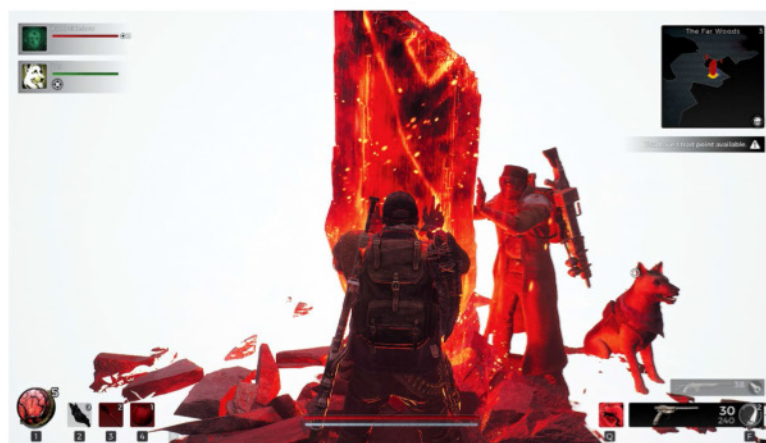
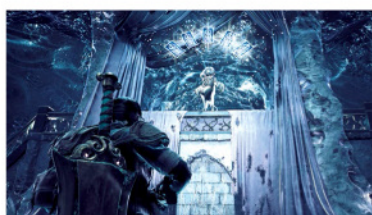


Ever feel like you're being watched?



RIGHT: Get a load of David Blaine over here.

FAR RIGHT: My mum told me not to go around touching weird crystals.



The...eh? I...eh? What?

run of *Remnant 2* feel pacey and purposeful, like a pastime rather than a project.

BIGGEST SURPRISES

Naturally, *Remnant 2* saves its biggest surprises for its bosses, although I'll say right now that not every boss is brilliant. A few dungeons I explored ended with me fighting a souped-up version of a regular enemy, while my first run of the game pitted me against not one but two amorphous blobs. On the other side of that coin, however, is a giant alien god that can punch through reality, and a living Root hive that crushes the platforms you fight it from. The standout encounter is against a creature called the Labyrinth Sentinel. I won't describe this in detail because it was such a fantastic surprise, but it's a sequence you might see if David Lynch directed an Indiana Jones movie. It's destined to become a regular feature in internet Best Boss Fight discussions, entirely original and utterly thrilling.

As a list of cool things to see, *Remnant 2* is longer than a loo roll. But you can see a lot of weird stuff on Instagram too, and you won't pay 40 quid for the privilege. Fortunately, behind *Remnant 2*'s surreal sightseeing tour is a thoroughly entertaining shooter. Mechanically, it gets the basics right. Movement is breezy but not weightless, the starting weapons are satisfying to wield, and your dodge-roll is nimble and has a generous invulnerability window. More broadly, the way *Remnant 2* filters combat encounters into its procedurally generated levels impresses. Enemies attack from all angles, requiring you to be constantly vigilant about your surroundings. But it isn't an endless, shapeless onslaught either. It ebbs and flows between tense and intense.

Combat becomes more distinctive when you fold in new weapons and archetypes – *Remnant*'s word for classes. *Remnant* isn't a *Borderlands*-style gun-fest, where incrementally better weapons are scattered like chewing gum on a pavement. Instead, you receive a couple of starting firearms that'll remain handy for most of the game, but can be modified with

special alt-fire modes. Alongside these, you'll occasionally pick up completely new weapons that function in vastly different ways. For example, I crafted a weapon called Twisted Arbalest that fired a stone discus which bounced rapidly between enemies. This made it fantastic for crowd control, but

less effective against tough single opponents, a trade-off I compensated for with a fast-firing secondary weapon. Weirdly though, none of this applies to armour.

There are some nifty armour sets to collect in *Remnant 2*, but they can't be crafted or modified.

Archetypes, meanwhile, grow more interesting as you progress. Of the six starting archetypes, I spent most of my time with the Handler, as it's comfortably the best class for mixed solo and cooperative play. The Handler is accompanied by an AI dog that not only helps you fight enemies, but can buff you with its howl and, most crucially, revive you if you're downed in combat. Each archetype has a mixture of active abilities and passive perks that level up as you progress through the game, and once you hit level ten you can equip a second archetype and mix its abilities with your own. So you could combine your Handler with the Hunter archetype, and boost your ranged damage. Alternatively, you could combine your starting Archetype with one of several secret archetypes, unlocked through exploration, such as the Alchemist, who can drop vials of concoctions for various buffs.

It's a well thought out system, but it isn't what you'll play the game for, simply because so much of the progression is either automated or

passive. For example, you can unlock around 30 different Traits that can be upgraded to provide passive bonuses, but it's all tiny gains like +1% Damage Reduction or +10% Mod Power Generation. Useful over time, but very unsexy. All the fun happens in weapon and weapon mod crafting.

ENTERTAINING COMBAT

Overall though, combat is both entertaining and rewarding. The same can't be said for *Remnant*'s overarching narrative, however. There are tons of interesting stories hidden within *Remnant 2*'s world, in the form of sidequests, individual world stories, and narrative asides like custom-written fables that you can leaf through in ancient libraries. The main plot, however, is even more incidental than last time, a 'find three things to save the universe' affair that is very basic and lacks any interesting twists or characters. It revolves heavily around a young woman called Clementine, who you spend precisely five minutes with before she is abducted by a strange inter-realm entity, and thus you never get the chance to form any relationship with the character. What's doubly odd is that you start the game accompanied by a completely different female character who is your avatar's closest friend. But once you arrive at Ward 13, this character is immediately relegated to NPC merchant.

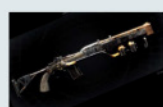
I can't imagine how hard it must be to write a coherent story for a game this wide-ranging, especially given large portions of *Remnant 2*'s campaign are procedural. But this is also exactly why *Remnant 2* needs it. Without a neatly threaded story or a consistent cast of side characters, *Remnant 2* can, at times, feel like a bunch of random cool shit Gunfire Games has tossed into a blender.

Still, perhaps that's the price for a game that refreshes itself with every other step you take. I might not take any unifying life lesson from *Remnant 2*, but there are a dozen smaller moments that'll be bouncing around my head for a good while, and that doesn't include the ones I haven't seen yet. ■

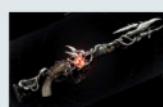
Overall though, combat is both entertaining and rewarding

ROCKING MODS

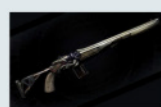
Mods alter the function of your weapon



HOTSHOT
This reliable starter mod turns your regular ammo into highly damaging incendiary rounds.



TREMOR
A root-based mod, Tremor launches a sphere onto the ground that triggers earthquakes.



BORE
A nasty mod which fires a drillbit into your enemy's body, dealing some damage over time.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Remnant 2 is a dependable looter shooter made special by its boundless capacity to surprise.

84

ARMORED & DANGEROUS

ARMORED CORE VI: FIRES OF RUBICON is every bit the revival this mech series deserved

By Wes Fenlon

After FromSoftware's incredible run from *Souls* to *Sekiro* to *Elden Ring*, *Armored Core VI* is a near-radical departure: short, relentlessly paced missions, forgiving retries, and an empowering arsenal that makes it clear you are a one mech army instead of some nasty little guy. Its lean approach holds it back in a few minor ways, but a big budget game this dead set on what it is and what it is not is a precious thing in 2023.

It may have taken FromSoftware a decade to return to its love of mechs, but it was worth the wait: *Armored Core VI* is a 'we're back on our bullshit' slam dunk.

This would be a great action game in any year, but I'm particularly smitten with *Armored Core* at this moment in time, sandwiched between epic 100-hour RPGs and following the success of the boundless *Elden Ring*. It could scarcely be more *Elden Ring*'s opposite: instead of being dumped into a wide open world, you select missions from a menu and then deploy your mech after a short briefing. Missions are usually over inside 10 minutes and are 100% protein, either hurling you straight into a short frenzied battle or peppering larger environments with snack-sized combat encounters that culminate in 1v1 showdowns against

other ACs or massive bosses. After each, returning to the menu to tinker with your AC and buy new parts is a well-earned exhale.

I can imagine concocting these scenarios in a childhood sandbox, staging my action figures for battle atop moist parapets and upside-down bucket mountains and then knocking them over one-by-one with my favourite Gundam.

This is Top Gun: Maverick for anime nerds like me

Armored Core VI's missions are that simple in construction and that thrilling in action. It allows you to snap together the pieces of your ultimate mech and then manifests those imagined backyard battles with a pink and neon green death machine that can make it rain lasers and hellfire, no mouth sounds needed. *Armored Core VI* prizes nothing as much as fulfilling the fantasy of piloting one of these machines and feeling cool while you do it.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
All-out mecha action

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
FromSoftware

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-13600K,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
playarmoredcore.com

LASER FOCUS

This is Top Gun: Maverick for anime nerds like me who grew up enraptured by Mobile Suit Gundam instead of F-14s. I will spend the next few months restraining myself from commandeering Discord chats to talk about the articulation of these mechs, and the little jolts of glee I got from watching each individual thruster change direction as I skated along the ground. And watching the hot flames flickering out and turning to steam when standing still. And the neon bloom of a plasma blade felling a lowly mech or an entire battleship in one charged up blow.

I always find one sound effect to hyperfixate on in a FromSoftware game – in *Dark Souls*, it's the bwaaam of parrying with a shield, a sound so concussive it gives 'anti-tank rifle' rather than 'little guy swinging his arm through the air'. It's ludicrous, but also makes perfect sense for the most powerful sound effect to play when you are, for a moment, literally invincible. Halfway through *Armored Core VI* I found my new love: the DUN-DUN of Songbirds, a double-barrelled cannon that fires anti-tank rounds in a burst.

Each shot packs six times the explosive power of a single missile and far more impact damage, sending heavily armoured four-legged mechs reeling when I score a clean hit. With Songbirds mounted on each shoulder I could even stagger bosses in a single volley – DUN-DUN, DUN-DUN – opening them up to extra damage from a slash of my laser blade. That staccato explosion became the death knell for every mech on Rubicon.

FASHION CORES

Helping sell the 'hell yeah mechs rule' tone is *Armored Core VI* being FromSoftware's first PC game to support frame rates over 60fps. While it's still lacking some bells and whistles, the game ran fantastically on my PC with the 120fps limit enabled. When I tried *Armored Core*

LEGS FOR DAYS

How each AC leg type affects your build



BIPEDAL

Vanilla, but the easiest to control. Lots of light and heavy options.



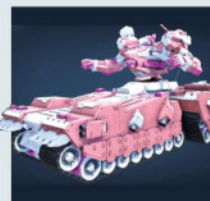
REVERSE

Reverse-joint ACs hop around like crickets. Best at vertical boosting.



TETRAPODS

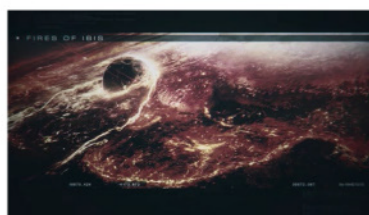
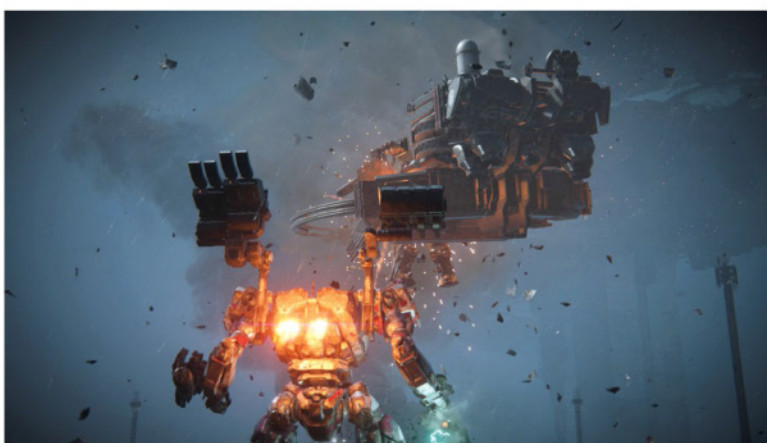
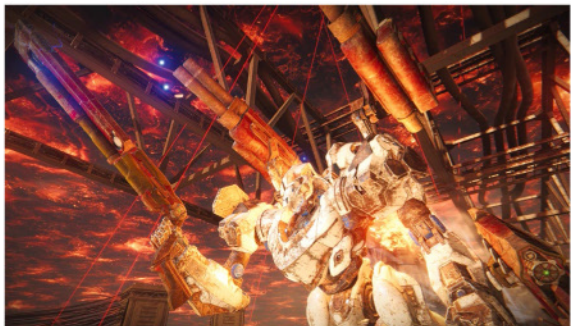
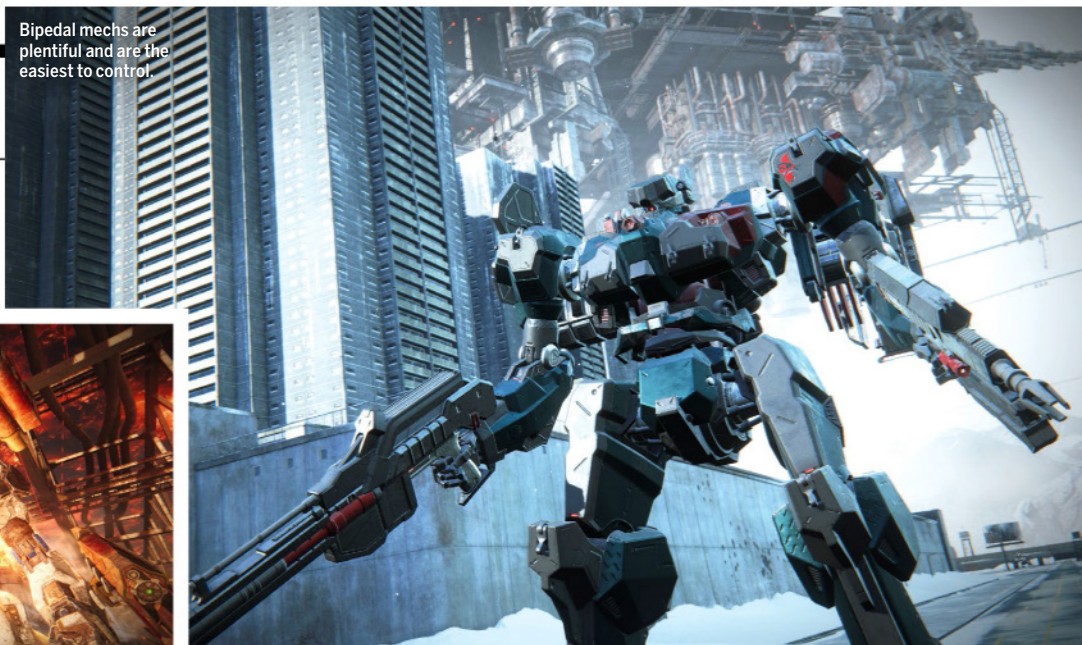
Tetrapods can hover for long periods and absorb heavy weapon recoil.



TANKS

Tanks offer armour and can snap-turn on the ground when boosting.

Bipedal mechs are plentiful and are the easiest to control.



FAR LEFT: Different mech types offer different boosts.

LEFT: Select your mission and then customise your mech.



Why carry one massive cannon when you can have two.



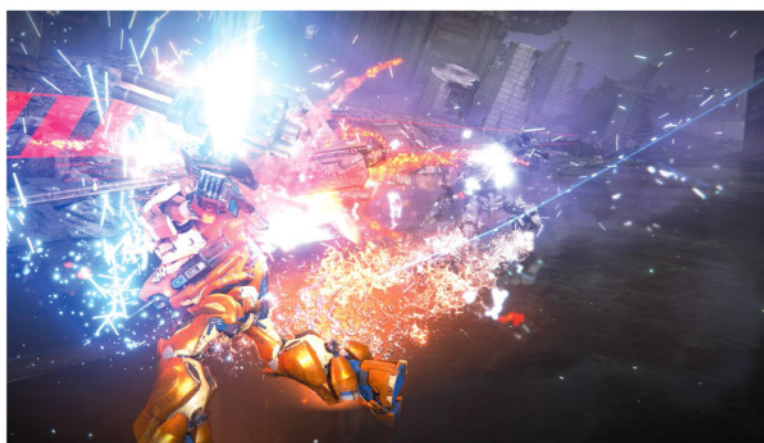
Killing blows are enjoyed in glorious slow-mo.



RIGHT: Neatly, you can paint your mech as you see fit.



FAR RIGHT: The technicolour bombast of mecha combat.



Environments are technodystopia chic in ACV1.

VI on the Steam Deck I got 40-60fps by turning all the settings down to low. Certainly playable, but I was immediately mourning the loss of that crisp image I got on my 1440p monitor, and how much of the immaculate presentation I was missing on the small screen.

There should be a line in the credits for the designer who dialed in the way the killing blow in every mission triggers a slow motion explosion, stretching that instant into ten seconds of glory. It's the most important decision anyone made in the course of designing this game.

I don't mean that as a joke: after a decade of making games about overcoming immense adversity, in *Armored Core VI* FromSoftware has made one in which you're an apex predator. Though you acquire more powerful weapons and other upgrades, from the beginning I felt incredibly capable: tapping the quick boost button to dodge incoming missiles, clicking a gamepad stick to rocket forward into a full thrust 'assault boost' that added extra impact to my melee attacks.

Lenient checkpoints let you tackle almost every tough battle with replenished ammo and healing items without retreading progress up to that point in the mission. When continuing you can also swap out any AC parts already in your garage. It's a savvy structure that encourages lots of experimentation.

POWERED UP

Purists need not despair over FromSoftware going soft: you can still replay missions and pursue S Ranks by winning without restarting or taking advantage of a resupply. And this is still a damn hard videogame in spots, with one boss near the end that took me three hours and dozens of tries to overcome. It was the only moment that struck me as a pure 'git gud' skill check, where experimenting with different builds and strategies felt completely futile. At least for me, that boss was an overtuned aberration alongside so many others that were tough, but better balanced. FromSoftware's usual demand for reflexes with a puzzley invitation to tinker my way to exactly the right mech for the job.

While *Armored Core VI*'s assembly menu offers stats on each part, while retrying duels against the elite ACs that could fly circles around me I did wish for more detailed feedback on how swapping one targeting module for another would affect my crosshair's accuracy, or how much faster my boost gauge would recharge

if I built a mech with a lighter energy draw. Exposing the minutia of these systems in something resembling *Street Fighter 6*'s training mode would allow for fine-tuning.

Across 25 hours with *Armored Core VI*,

my only other disappointment came from the environments, which are stunning snapshots of a crumbling technodystopia that offer no interactivity beyond a few hidden chests and wrecked mechs with tiny scraps of lore. On the whole *Armored Core VI*'s lean, focused nature is a great strength, but there's so much atmosphere in the world's visual design that it ends up underutilised. The voice in my ear as you fight could easily have chimed in more often as I explored nooks and crannies; some of the larger stages offer time and space to poke around, but practically nothing to find.

It's a missed opportunity in a game that's heavier on explicit story than FromSoftware's RPGs.

Purists need not despair over FromSoftware going soft

AC ANATOMY ANNOTATED

Use this cheat sheet to ace your *Armored Core* anatomy test

1 HANDS

The pulse gun (AC's right) and stun baton (left) are short-range, but ideal for punching through shields.

2 CORE

The core affects generator efficiency and how quickly you can be staggered.

3 HEAD

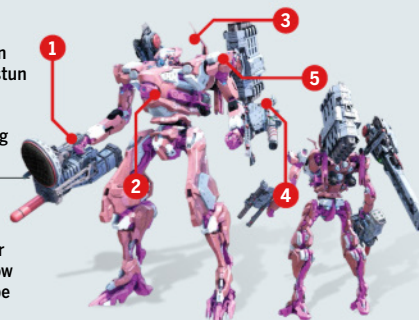
The head determines how quickly you recover from a staggered state.

4 ARMS

Arms affect your weapon tracking and weapon weight limitations.

5 SHOULDERS

The laser cannon (AC's right) and missile launcher (left) offer long-range damage.



THAT'S SO RAVEN

There's more in-your-face narrative here than in all three *Dark Souls* games combined, as Rubicon's corporate mercenary squads regularly send you voice messages after each sortie to chit-chat about the aftermath of whatever you've just blown up. The option to replay missions makes it easy to ignore in favour of your own stories: could you grasshopper-leap your way to an objective with a mech built for verticality, leaving the ground defences left in your dust? Could the thick cloud of drones taking annoying potshots at you in another mission be wiped out in a single volley of multi-lock missiles?

There's a slight 'we saved money by not animating any of this' feel to the story playing out in voiceover monologues, but that also means the cutscenes are potent, like an IV drip of mecha fan service. They only mash that button so many times, but each time it feeds back into that core guiding principle: mechs are cool.

As in classic *Armored Core*, I love how ruthlessly VI keeps its tone. Pilots do not have lives outside their machines. You will never see a human being. Every alliance is temporary, as the corporations competing for Rubicon's resources will hire you to backstab the pilots you just fought alongside. The narrative branches at a few points based on which missions you choose to take and who you choose to kill – with an insidiously brilliant knife twist that the story path I think most people will want to go down presents some much harder battles, with an easier option there to taunt you. Nothing sells corporate dystopia better than screwing over those who've stuck their necks out for you.

After hours of building up a kinship with those voices I heard over the comms, I felt bad about shooting them down. But not, like, bad bad, because I was just there to do a job. I was there to get paid, to build a better mech, so I could do it all again better, faster, and cooler. This is *Armored Core*. We are blessed to have it back. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

The coolest mechs in gaming history form the core of an intense, focused action game in *Armored Core VI*.

87

RIVETING

RATCHET & CLANK: RIFT APART is a visually spectacular action adventure

By Robin Valentine

This action adventure is the quintessential console exclusive. Released for the PlayStation 5 in 2021, it takes a beloved duo of Sony mascots and sends them on a journey designed to show off the capabilities of that hardware – particularly its fast-loading SSD, showcased with a story all about hopping between different universes. All of which makes it a bit of an oddity to be reviewing on PC in 2023.

Let's start with the simple stuff. Even if you have no familiarity with the *Ratchet & Clank* series – which, if you're a dedicated PC player, you almost certainly don't – *Rift Apart* is an accessible introduction. Set in a bright and cartoony sci-fi galaxy, the game follows Ratchet, a furry alien space hero, and his robot sidekick Clank, as they attempt to solve an interdimensional crisis set off by one of their old foes. Though there's a weight of history here, with tons of references for long-time fans and the pair almost playing the role of retired veterans after their many adventures across the series' 20 years of games, it's all easy enough to understand. Clank wants to help Ratchet find his lost people, Ratchet is trepidatious about it, they both want to save the universe – simple.

Said interdimensional crisis provides sufficient excuse for yet another multiverse-hopping story – and for the introduction of Rivet and Kit. These two are essentially female versions of the leads, but fully realised and compelling in their own right, and as totally new heroes provide an even easier lead into the game for newcomers. As you progress through the story, you alternate between playing Ratchet and Rivet, who share all the same abilities and equipment, but have very different outlooks on the world.

The action is pure cinematic adventure. Between regular bouts of third-person shooting and light platforming, you're thrown into

extravagant set-pieces, lavish boss fights, and lovingly-crafted cutscenes, with a little exploration and puzzle-solving for spice. Rarely is it taxing, but it isn't dull, never letting any of its ideas outwear their welcome over the course of its runtime.

For a PS5 player in 2021, it was an easy recommendation – with its slick, big-budget visuals and smooth performance, it was a solid, if frothy, theme park ride to show off what Sony's hardware could do. On PC in 2023? Well... my feelings are a little more complicated.

NUTS AND BOLTS

Let's address the elephant in the room: Sony's interest in PC seems to have been growing in recent years, with a string of high profile ports of its back catalogue, but it hasn't all

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A former PS5 exclusive action adventure about multiversal chaos in an alien galaxy

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Insomniac Games, Nixxes Software

PUBLISHER
PlayStation PC LLC

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 9 5900X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3080

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
insomniac.games/game/ratchet-clank-rift-apart

been smooth going. Recently, *The Last of Us* PC port was so poor we had to give one of the most acclaimed console games of all time a 50% review score. The good news is, *Rift Apart* is not a repeat of that disaster.

With my GeForce RTX 3080 graphics card and Ryzen 9 5900X processor, the game mostly runs at a smooth 60+fps at max settings, wavering down to around 45 only in a few particularly dense areas. Sequences in which you hop rapidly between dimensions – originally intended to show off how much faster the PS5's SSD is than the PS4's hard drive – have had a few noticeable loading pauses for me, but not long enough to diminish the spectacle. Indeed, the game has very little noticeable loading time throughout, despite the speed with which you can travel between levels and planets. Particularly impressive is that even when I switched my installation over from my SSD to a hard drive, I noticed little difference in loading and performance.

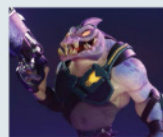
There's a full range of graphics and display settings to tweak to your liking, including an FOV slider, adjustable weather effects, and you can even choose how the game performs its upscaling. A wealth of control options let you adjust the feel of the game's action, and there are specific settings for speed runners that allow you to remove certain pauses and slow-mo elements to shave seconds off your time. It's a robust port, the kind you'd hope to see from one of the biggest game publishers in the world.

And though it doesn't run quite as smoothly as it did on PS5, *Rift Apart* remains a lovely way to push your hardware. Visual spectacle is the game's greatest strength, combining technical wizardry with a gorgeously exuberant art style to create scenes and vistas that are no less impressive for being two years old. Particle effects abound, backgrounds are always dense with activity,

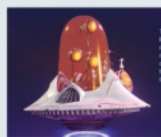
Sony's interest in PC seems to have been growing in recent years

BAD GUIDE

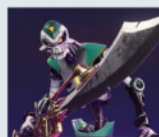
Meet the enemy factions of Rift Apart



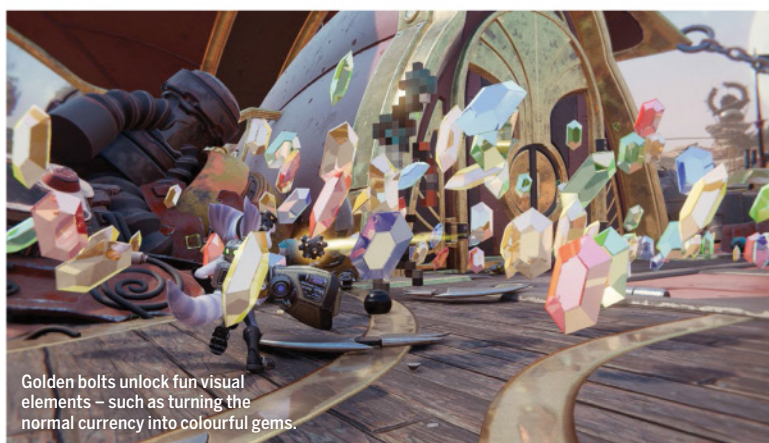
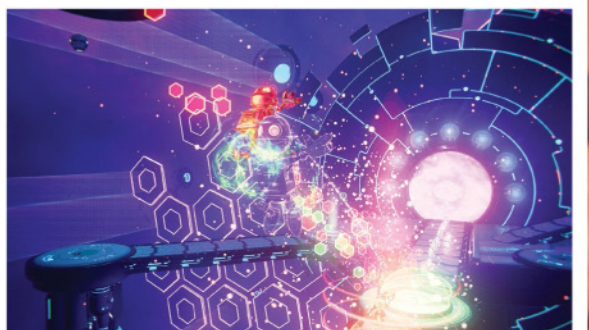
GOONS 4 LESS
These reptilian bounty hunters have been hired by the evil Dr Nefarious to capture you – and even getting lost in alternate dimensions doesn't slow them down.



NEFARIOUS
In Rivet's dimension, Nefarious is the emperor of the galaxy. Assuming his identity, Ratchet's Nefarious takes control and sends these forces after both heroes.



SPACE PIRATES
These androids raid civilised planets and spread chaos wherever they go. They bear a longstanding grudge against Rivet, for previous times she's kicked their butt.



Golden bolts unlock fun visual elements – such as turning the normal currency into colourful gems.



LEFT: A photo mode lets you see all the lovely little details of the world.

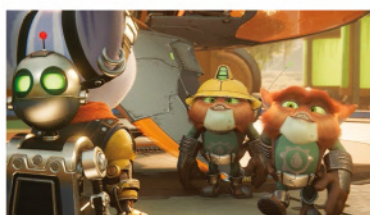


BELOW: A hacking minigame takes the form of entire levels where you pilot a tiny robot around circuit boards and blast viruses.

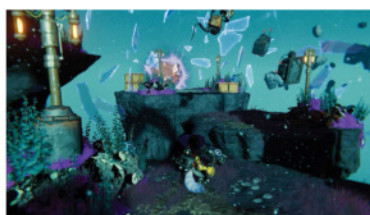




RIGHT: Rivet's closest allies are the Morts, a group of identical aliens with Minnesota accents. They're all named Mort.



BELOW: To fix dimensional rifts, Clank has to jump in and solve light puzzles in a trippy dreamscape.



Rifts between dimensions drive the plot, though the multiverse idea is never pushed as far as it could be.



dimensional portals send you hurtling from a cyberpunk city to a storm-lashed pirate ship in seconds, and cutscenes feel the equal of many blockbuster animated movies.

GUN SHOW

It excels at both the big and small details. Enormous robots and towering dinosaurs crash into scenes as a matter of course, but at the same time a wonderful amount of care is given to the subtle movements and facial expressions of its characters. Though the story hardly plumbs complex emotional depths, you'll certainly find yourself empathising with the cast a lot more than you ever expected to with a furry-faced alien or a robot the size of a lunchbox.

Every combat encounter is glorious visual chaos. The basic shooting is very straightforward – there's no cover, and the aiming is very generous, so you're free to just run around blasting without much need for tactical thinking. What adds colour is a huge arsenal of wild and wacky weapons. Even your most basic options include a shotgun as big as Ratchet that fires double blasts of coruscating electricity, and a grenade that explodes into pink crystal shards that... also explode. Things only get more wonderfully surreal from there, including a gun that fires rocket drills that burrow under enemies, a sprinkler that turns enemies into topiary, and a summonable mushroom man who aids you in battle.

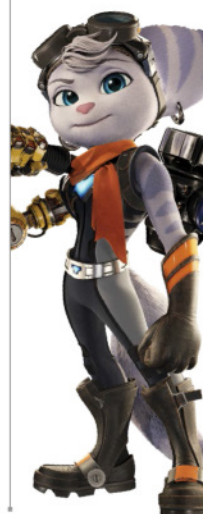
Though none elevate the strategy much beyond pointing at enemies and clicking, the sheer creativity and visual flair of each weapon ensures combat never grows stale – particularly because you can always bring all of them into battle, your weapon wheel simply gaining more and more tabs to flick between

as you fill them up. Each gun also levels up as you use it, unlocking new nodes on an upgrade tree that can be filled out with the game's primary collectible, Raritanium. Though many of these feel a bit

restrained considering the goofiness of the guns – it's disappointing, for example, that the first major milestone for a weapon that literally blasts enemies into pixelated versions of themselves is just that they're a bit more likely to drop health when they die – enough investment in your favourite guns does make a huge impact in combat.

You're almost as well-equipped for the game's platforming and exploration. Starting off with a double-jump, grappling hook and magnet boots, in short order you gain a generous air dash, wall-running, rocket boots that let you blast around at top speed, and more. They're all put to good use in various escapes and chase scenes over the course of the story, inevitably with things exploding and dimensions tearing open all around you as you go. But they come into their own when you take a break from your quest to go hunting for side content.

Every combat encounter is glorious visual chaos



Each of the game's planets is its own little hub. Some are modest – barely more than whatever area you went through as part of the story – while others are like mini open worlds that you're free to explore. Several have major sidequests to go back and complete, realised with just as much cinematic craft as the main story. And all of them are stuffed with collectibles to uncover, from Raritanium to new outfits to 'golden bolts' that let you do everything from reskinning your melee weapon to changing what currency looks like to applying different camera filters.

ANOTHER DIMENSION

Working your way through everything *Rift Apart* has to offer is a gentle but satisfying experience. No enemy is that hard to beat, no collectible is that convoluted to find, and there's plenty of mechanical and visual variety to prevent you getting bored. As a weekend of cinematic adventure and pleasant ticking off of tasks, it's really endearing.

The problem is that even collecting absolutely everything, doing every sidequest, and fully upgrading every gun in addition to completing the main story only took me about 15 hours total. If you just mainline the critical path, it'll be ten hours or less. There is a new game+ mode, with further levels of weapon upgrades to gain, but while I enjoyed my time with *Rift Apart*, there certainly isn't enough depth to compel me to immediately replay it.

Brevity is no bad thing in games, but it's hard to escape the sense that *Rift Apart* is a console showcase that feels far less vital on PC. Though it came out six months after the PS5, it has all the hallmarks of a launch game – designed to reveal what the hardware can do at a point when not many other options are available. It's great-looking and likeable – you'd have to be pretty curmudgeonly not to get some joy out of its colourful galaxy – but it's far more style than substance. At £50 it's hard to escape the fact that on PC there are bigger, meatier experiences you could put that money towards. ■

BANG FOR YOUR BUCK

Look after your guns, and they'll look after you

1 RARITANIUM
Use Raritanium to unlock these upgrade nodes – each grants a small buff, such as more max ammo or a higher firing rate.

2 GOLD NODE
Unlock all the nodes around a gold node, and it activates, granting a unique bonus, such as this one for Shatterbomb that adds explosive shards to every boom.



3 LEVEL UP
As you use a weapon in combat, it gains XP and levels up. Each level makes more nodes and gold nodes available to purchase.

4 EVOLUTION
At level 5, weapons evolve to a new form. Shatterbomb becomes Shatterblast, and gains a chance to make enemies damaged by it explode themselves.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Rift Apart is a likeable adventure, but at this price it's hard to recommend over more substantial experiences.

80

GORD STIFF

Don't sacrifice your time to mediocre survival strategy **GORD**

By Rick Lane

Gord opens with a disclaimer that it “explores mature scenarios and themes”, including among its list of triggering material “sacrifice” and “child sacrifice”. What it means by this is it lets you witness *Mortal Kombat* fatalities being performed on children. When I first brought a shuddering waif to kneel before one of the various “horrors” that rule Gord’s forests, I expected some artful cutaway when came to the big moment.

Nope! Instead, Mr Blobby’s evil cousin wrapped its tentacles around the screaming urchin, raised them into the air, and crunched them down like a bony strawberry. I’m not one to moralise on what imagery games should and should not depict. But if you want me to take your gritty tale of survival in the wilderness seriously, then I question the wisdom of presenting the ritual murder of children with all the tact of a glory kill from *Doom Eternal*. Not that I want to rag on these tasteless scenes too much, because without them I’d have little of note to write about.

What lies behind the attention-grabbing horrors is a thoroughly middling blend of city-building, survival gaming, and RTS that takes place in a medieval-ish world inspired by Polish folklore. Think *Frostpunk*, but replace the snow with shadows. You control a band of the King’s subjects tasked with building gords, a Slavonic term for a fortified settlement. If you didn’t know what a gord was before now, you’ll certainly know after a few hours with *Gord*. The game’s advisor can’t go five minutes without saying “gord”.

You start off your gord by building the palisade wall. While you have some leeway in its shape and location, its starting size is strictly limited. And since you can only construct buildings inside the wall, this means you must be extremely careful about where you place structures. Once the palisade wall is complete, you need to keep the settlers inside alive. This means

harvesting resources like wood and reeds to build new structures, mining clay and iron to upgrade them, and constructing hunting lodges and fishing huts to source food. Crucially, these stations only function when you assign settlers to them, who will then venture out into the wilds automatically to collect the resource.

But the wilds are called such for a reason. The gloom is

filled with wolves, wild boars, bears, alligators, and stranger creatures like bloodworms, goblin like Gazers, and of course, the aforementioned horrors. The most dangerous threat is the darkness itself, constantly gnawing at your settlers’ sanity.

In short, a lot of things can go wrong, and *Gord* is most interesting when they do. One of my settlers, a fellow named Leif, spent too long in the darkness and became frenzied, meaning he’d randomly attack other people in the gord. I couldn’t afford to do without him, so I had to put up

The gloom is filled with wolves, wild boars, bears, alligators

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A dark fantasy management sim with basic mechanics and a bleak tone

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
Covenant.dev

PUBLISHER
Team17

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600, 32 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Super

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
gord.game

with him occasionally shanking people and running away.

WILD THINGS

Unfortunately, keeping your settlers alive and sane is far less fun than watching them lose their marbles and die. Since new settlers are ‘born’ at random intervals, you never have enough to do every job at once, so you must switch them between roles constantly. If they need a health or sanity-restoring break at the Bania or Meadery, they don’t go back to work once the particular stat is replenished. They just sit there. If they’re attacked in the wilderness, they’ll always try to fight it out, rather than running back to the gord.

Indeed, considering *Gord* is about building a defensive structure, you don’t get to use those defences much. Combat is a basic RTS affair of recruiting axemen, archers, or spearmen and having them duke it out, usually outside the gord. This leads into a broader issue that *Gord*’s focus rests too much on what happens outside the gord than what happens inside it. It’s just a place where you establish and upgrade buildings, where you settlers work but don’t live. There’s no sense of community, no developing relationships, rivalries, or feuds between the people you lead. You don’t even have to build shelters them.

Gord possesses a certain moody atmosphere, and some smaller ideas contained within show promise, such as how you can assign scouts to be torchbearers for your workers. Beyond that, there’s little here that hasn’t been done better elsewhere, and the game never feels like it grapples with its own subject. ■

SPELLING LESSON

Nasty effects of eldritch incantations



FRACTURE
Twists up your enemy’s limbs until their skeleton pops.



INFEST
Overwhelm a group of foes with biting insects.



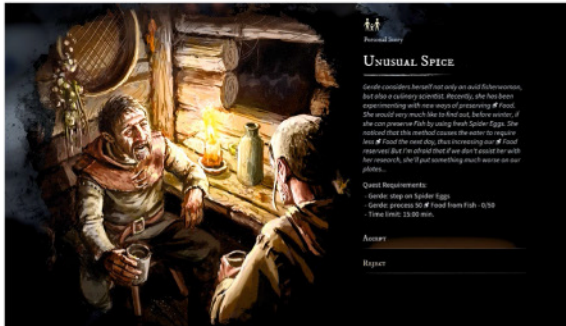
ABYSS
Opens a portal to suck enemies into oblivion.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Beyond the shock value of its demonic horrors, this survivalist city-builder has little to recommend it.

48

This guy?
Massive prick.



FAR LEFT: Sidequests attempt to add a bit of personality, but are undermined by the tedious objectives.

LEFT: GO BACK TO WORK YOU LAZY SODS.



Vuk you too.

MARLEY & ME

SHADOW GAMBIT: THE CURSED CREW embraces the magic of save-scumming

By Dominic Tarason

Mimimi is a studio that understands its niche. *Shadow Tactics*, *Desperados 3* and now *Shadow Gambit: The Cursed Crew* are fundamentally the same game; tactical squad stealth where players must quicksave and load until they can pull off a flawless heist. This time they're celebrating the power to quicksave. *Shadow Gambit* makes it a magical plot MacGuffin and the power of the Red Marley, your sapient pirate galleon.

For newcomers to the series and genre, *Shadow Tactics*, *Desperados 3* and *Shadow Gambit* are what Mimimi defines as 'stealth strategy' games. Take your *Metal Gear*, *Hitman* or *Splinter Cell* and pull the camera up to an RTS perspective and give the player a small squad of sneaky sorts to complete their goals and get out intact. From this elevated perspective, players are free to plot, plan and see exactly where every guard is looking, which is good, because maps tend to be lousy with guards patrols.

Despite the perspective change, it's immediately intuitive to stealth game fans, dodging sight cones, hiding in long grass, picking off isolated guards and spending limited resources to clear out especially stubborn enemies, as well as using

each character's special abilities to lure out, distract or eliminate foes. Mimimi's format gives the added opportunity to pause time and synchronise actions for impeccably timed takedowns, refined through as many saves and loads as is needed to pull it off perfectly. It doesn't matter if it took me twenty failures to pull off a manoeuvre, because it's that one golden success that sticks in my memory.

Shadow Gambit is no different in its core mechanics, although the magical pirate setting gives it a little more room to get silly than its predecessors. Every mission presents you with an objective protected by a tightly woven pattern of enemy patrols, all seemingly within each other's sight-lines. One mistake and it

The magical pirate setting gives it a little more room to get silly

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Stealthy squad tactics with an undead pirate crew

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Mimimi Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900K,
64GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
shadowgambit.com

all comes tumbling down on your squad, so each mission begins with casing the joint, looking for that one guard that can be isolated, that one thread in the tapestry that can be pulled loose, letting you unravel it all to clear the path. It's a tried-and-true formula I've enjoyed before and still holds up as well as ever. And if it was just more of the same, I'd be happy enough, but it's what *Shadow Gambit* does differently that held my attention for its full and lengthy thirty-odd hour campaign.

RUM DOINGS

Shadow Gambit is a mission-based progression through increasingly complex maps, carefully unpicking ever more convoluted webs of guard patrols until your path to the goal is clear. But the framing here is very different. While the other stealth tactics games practically demanded saving and loading, *Shadow Gambit* treats that option for what it is and the freedom to cheat fate, making it a fine hook to hang a story from.

Shadow Gambit's setting is a fun one. Swashbuckling sorcery, with a local populace happy to have the undead wandering around so long as they behave and pay for their rum. The campaign here has you reassembling the undead crew of the Red Marley, a sapient vessel with the power to save and restore time. Pursued by an order of flame-worshipping inquisitors, the crew are racing against the church militant to find their previous captain's lost treasure, which of course requires solving a convoluted riddle.

The high-seas fantasy setting affords *Shadow Gambit* more whimsy in its playable characters and enemy roster. There are eight playable pirates in varying states of undeadness, each with their own supernatural powers. Perspective protagonist Afia has the power to teleport through view-cones. Pinkus Von Presswald can possess guards. Ship's doctor Suleidy can

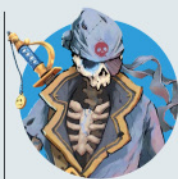
MOTLEY CREW

If you want to be sneaky, consider these sailors



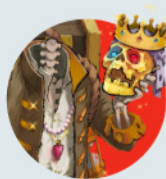
**TERESA
LA CIEGA**

You'd be surprised at how useful a blind sniper with only one crossbow bolt might be, but you need to recover her soul-shot after each attack.



TOYA OF IGA

The ship's cook and resident mystical ninja. Place trap-charms, then teleport to them to either escape or attack whoever's standing near it.



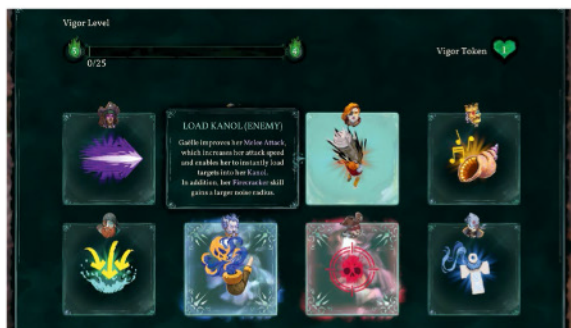
**QUENTIN
AALBERS**

A quirky one. Distract guards by throwing his alluring golden skull, and use his fishing rod to yank foes out of position.



**PINKUS VON
PRESSWALD**

A foppish blowhard, but also a ghost wizard that can possess guards and wear them like a suit. He can lose control if the alarm is raised.



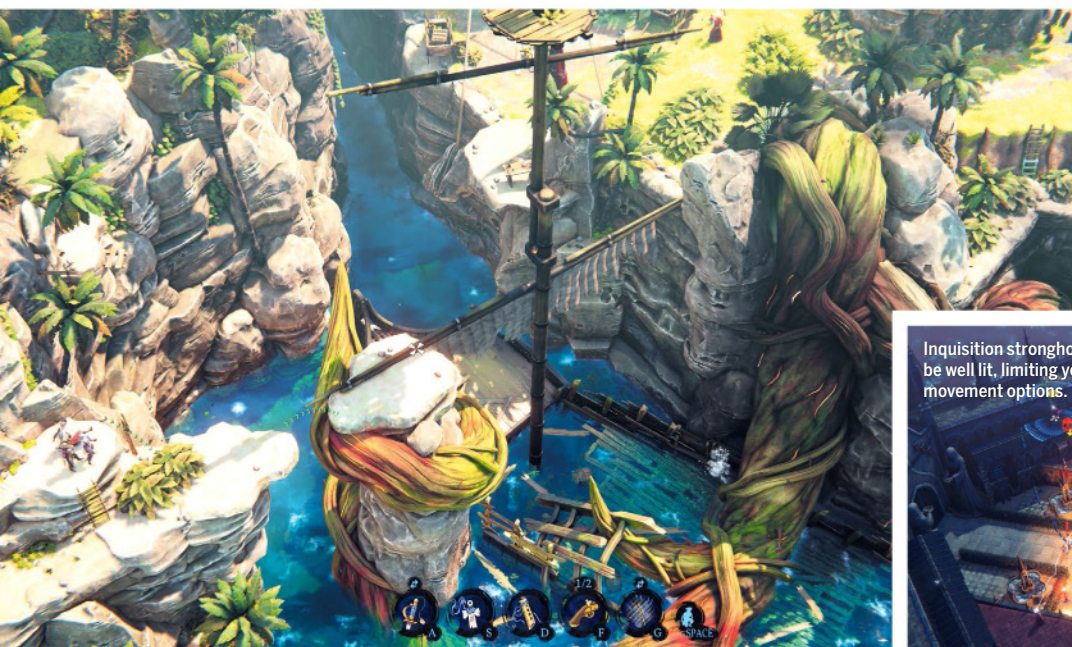
After each mission, you get a very satisfying map-view replay.



ABOVE: This island is perpetually frozen in a magical explosion, shockwave and all.

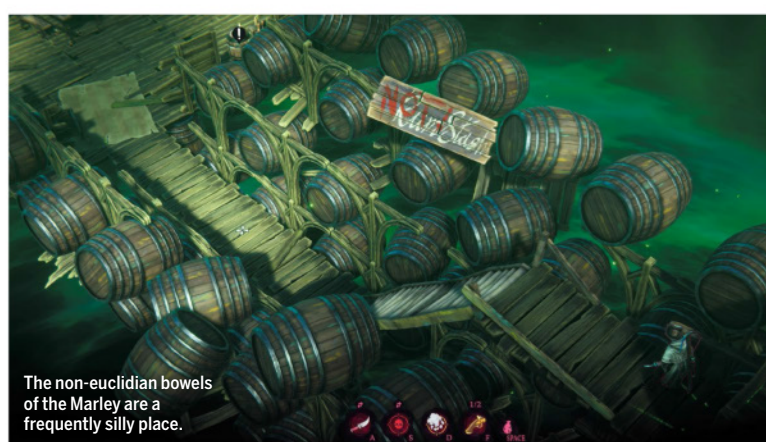
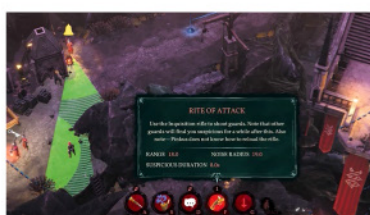


The deck of the Marley gets quite lively once the crew are reassembled.



Inquisition strongholds tend to be well lit, limiting your sneaky movement options.

RIGHT: Pinkus' infiltration skills are invaluable, but not without limitation.



The non-euclidian bowels of the Marley are a frequently silly place.



The Inquisition's fortress, all white marble and sunlight. A pirate's nightmare.

☞ spontaneously grow shrubberies, which are surprisingly useful.

Those powers would probably break a slightly more realistic game, but the enemies here have some magical perks. While most are standard stealth-game guards following familiar patrol routes, there's some fun twists. Kindred are magically tethered duos who'll revive each other unless both are taken down simultaneously. Nastiest are Prognosticators, wizards who'll instantly react to disturbances within their hearing radius with a spell that will freeze the offending undead and kill them a few seconds later.

DEAD AND LOVING IT

Every mission in *Shadow Gambit* forced me into using every member of my three-pirate squad to the fullest, but left squad composition up to me. While the game did warn me a couple of times to bring a character who has the ability to lure away or redirect guards, I found every mission doable with almost any combination of cursed pirates, even if my own decisions forced some creative thinking and applications of their powers. Plus, it's just fun to play around with the crew – they're a fun bunch of ghosts, half-zombies, plant-people and skeletons.

They're a funny and likable bunch, well voiced, with accents from across the seven seas. They've plenty to say on each mission, personal side-stories on board the Marley between raids, and plenty of banter to hear in-mission, reacting to each other's powers and your own quicksaying and loading. Being undead, they also share a rather laissez-faire attitude to mortality. While you have the option to expend more time and effort to knock enemies out instead of killing them, there's little mechanical reason to, and thematically they'll be up and haunting the place in no time anyway. While I'm sure pacifist playthroughs are possible, I'm saving that for another playthrough.

The trade-off for this increased freedom is that *Shadow Gambit* sometimes feels less authored than its peers. Earlier Mimimi games felt like you were given a series of long, complex bespoke puzzles to solve

with a fixed set of tools. While there was always some flexibility, you were still solving puzzles as intended. Instead, *Shadow Gambit* is set across an archipelago of islands, each holding several missions to pick from, and each sortie letting you pick your point of entry, exit and what tools you'll be using for the job.

I found myself changing up my squad at every opportunity

Shadow Gambit's story breaks down nicely into three acts, each of which ends in a larger mission. Each gives the player more freedom than the last in how to progress, both in terms of what missions they choose to undertake, and in how those missions are approached. Outside of some missions that demand a specific pirate, you're free to pick, with only the occasional nudge to choose frequency benched characters to earn more experience points for unlocking secondary powers, with one upgrade available per character.

UNCHARTED WATERS

This added freedom isn't really a positive or negative change for the series, just a lateral shift that gives *Shadow Gambit* its identity, which feels eerily similar to both *Dishonored* and the *Hitman* trilogy. The puzzle-boxes may be fixed problems to solve, but the tools you bring can be wildly different each time. With eight

characters to pick from, each with their own mobility options and supernatural powers, I found myself changing up my squad at every opportunity just to see what fun new approaches and synergies I could discover, and I expect almost every player's experience to be different.

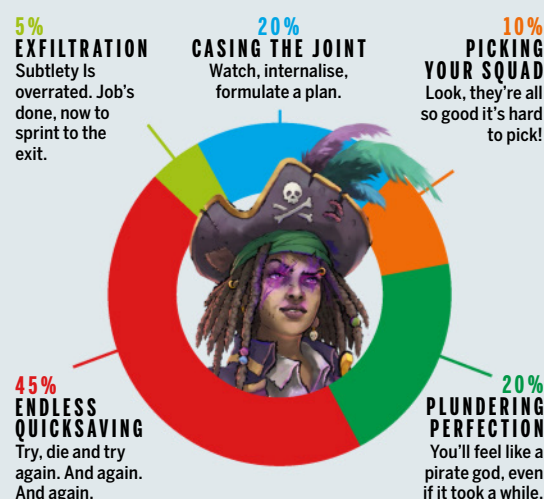
After losing no small amount of sleep to 'just one mission more' compulsion, I've very few solid criticisms to level at *Shadow Gambit*, outside of yawning and itchy eyes. If I had to nitpick, I'd say that the first act of the story takes longer to ramp up than I'd like, but that's only as a stealth strategy veteran. The learning curve and smaller scope of earlier missions should help newcomers on board. A slightly more direct issue is that some of the crew's powers can be fiddly to use in real-time, like Gaëlle le Bris and her people-launching cannon. Trying to launch a specific person when two are laying on the ground beside each other felt like a coin-flip at times, and targeting when multiple enemies were near a ladder was similarly fiddly, leading to a few instances of two characters attacking the same guard.

Despite *Shadow Gambit's* missions being smaller on average than in *Desperados* (most around 20-30 minutes, with the occasional hour-long set piece), this is a bountiful barrel of grog, clocking in at around 30 hours long, and unlocking a pirate's hoard of post-game challenges to encourage replaying previous missions. With flexible difficulty settings (letting you tweak enemy placement, AI response times and even how many times you're allowed to save per mission) and multiple approaches to every mission, there's plenty of reason to replay earlier islands here. While I never really felt compelled to return to Mimimi's earlier games, I can see myself reinstalling this as a regular event.

Whether it's experimenting with powers, working out the perfect play or just speedrunning, I can see each player finding their own reason to return long after the story's conclusion. This one's a real treasure, even if you might have to dig a bit to get to the really shiny plunder. ■

CRUISE CONTROL

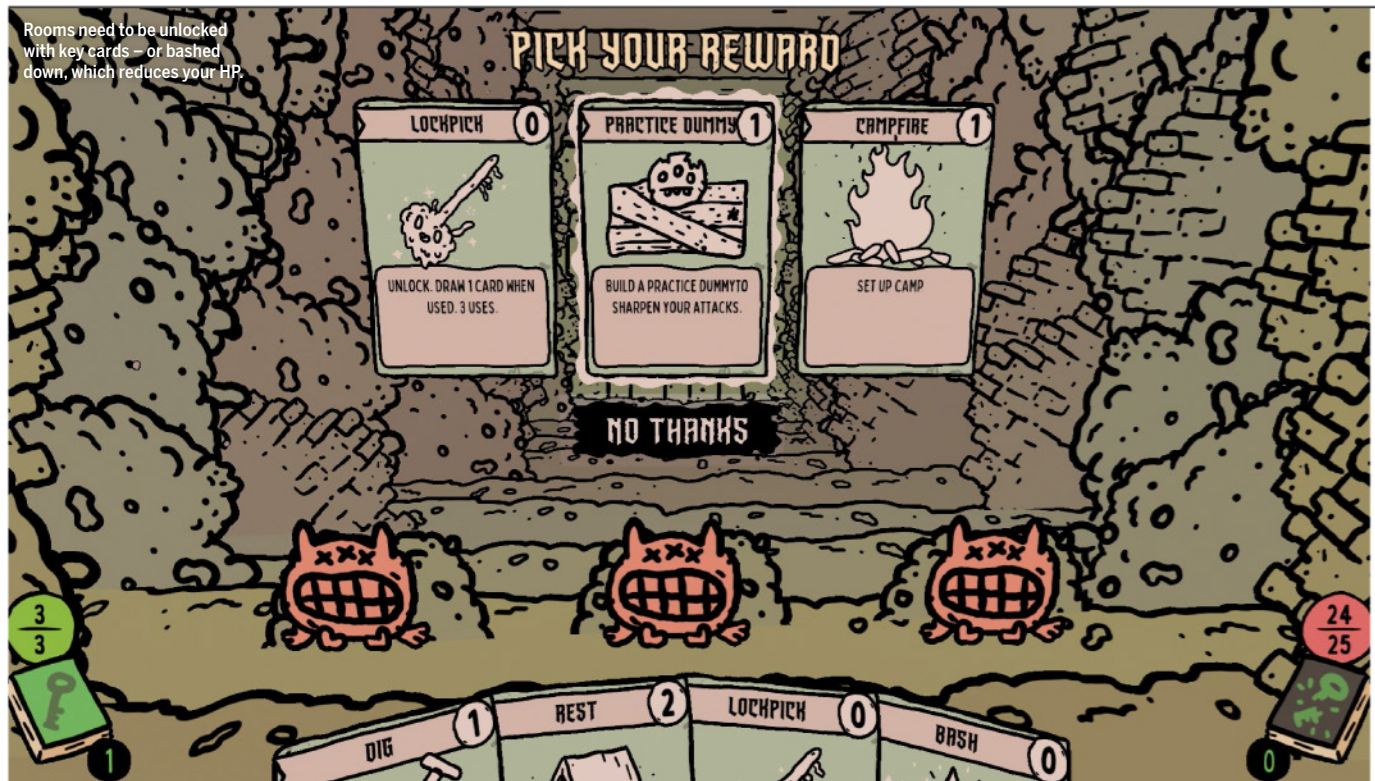
How the average mission breaks down



PC GAMER VERDICT

On par with its predecessors, *Shadow Gambit* trades some focused design for compelling freedom.

87



TRUFFLE SHUFFLE

There's not mushroom for error in **SHROOM AND GLOOM**

Shroom and Gloom takes the deckbuilding roguelike and bungs in a big load of mushrooms. Your enemies are murderous fungus people, and most of the cards are mycology-themed. On top of that, it's all exquisitely hand-drawn. You know the basics by now: every turn you expend energy to play cards that are randomly drawn from your deck, while out of battle you plough through a dungeon, gradually acquiring shiny new cards.

The difference with *Shroom and Gloom* is that the dungeon is viewed from the first-person perspective, although admittedly you're still walking in a very strict straight line, without the ability to sidestep or even go backwards. But exploration is neatly handled by the game's second deck of cards, which come into play in the safe rooms located between each combat encounter.

Similarly to the battle deck, these out-of-combat cards are randomly drawn each time you reach a safe room, and they do things like heal you up or improve one of your cards. Typical deckbuilder stuff, but here they're given a delightful makeover: you remove cards by having a toad lick them, for example.

There are other cards that lean even more into the fungus theme. You can dispatch a pig to hunt for rare truffle cards, and combine mushroom cards together in a cooking pot. You can create a spread of interesting builds in the game, and enjoy the squelchy artwork while you're doing so.

You can dispatch a pig to hunt for rare truffle cards

Deckbuilding games are not often visually exciting, so it's refreshing to play a deckbuilder that really shakes up the presentation, with its sketchy underworld and novel first-person movement. When combat breaks out, it's against cute cartoon monsters burrowing up from the ground in a claustrophobic tunnel.

Combat plays out like *Slay the Spire*, of course, but with an emphasis

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A deckbuilding roguelike set in a mushroomy first-person underworld

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Team LazerBeam

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
bit.ly/ShroomGloom

on interrupting attacks, as quite a lot of things carry over from turn to turn.

PORTABELLO GROUND

The more memorable synergies involve turning the monsters into delicious food, which can heal you up or even increase your maximum health. These food cards, naturally, do not cost any energy to play in battle, so if you can find a way to make them appear more often, you're well on your way to becoming a mushroom-devouring god.

Take note that this is not the sort of time-devouring deckbuilder that has hundreds of cards, multiple characters, online leaderboards and persistent upgrades. You're on your own in one short-ish dungeon, and you begin from square one every time you die. You won't play for hundreds of hours, but I think you'll remember the few you spent squidding around the mushroom dungeon. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A compact card-based roguelike with a strong system at its core, a fresh perspective and an earthy theme.

85

BELOW: I'm going to make incredibly detailed, specific wishes.



MONKEY SEE

Monkey do in sci-fi adventure game **THE THIRD WISH**

The tale of the wish-granting monkey's paw is brought into the future in *The Third Wish*, a point-and-click made for the Adventure Game Jam. Despite being made in just two weeks, the game is fully voice-acted, which really helps to emphasise the obvious *Twilight Zone* influence.

You play as Mr White, whose family runs a moisture farm on a desert planet, a place where shrivelled monkey limbs are the furthest thing from his mind. A few traditional point-and-click puzzles later, an old trader friend appears and shares his story. He ends the night by discarding the monkey paw that has ruined his life – and telling you to destroy it.

It would be a happier, shorter game if you obeyed him, but after some cajoling from your family, you do indeed make three wishes with

the paw. Inevitably it all turns paw-shaped, in a suitably ironic conclusion complete with a plummy, Rod Serling-esque voice-over.

The game begins and ends strongly, but it is uneven in the middle, when the traditional puzzle-solving of the early game is abruptly jettisoned. From then on it's a linear, contained story in which you occasionally select the dialogue.

The second half feels a bit squished, like it needed more setting up, but the titular third wish that ends the story is expertly done. Grisly details are implied rather than shown, leaving a little space for your imagination to imagine the worst. As *Twilight Zone*-style adventure games go, I don't think this is up there with the *Midnight Scenes* series, but it's still an enjoyably hammy sci-fi story with lovely pixel art. ■

71

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
George Broussard

LINK
bit.ly/ThirdWish

GOD IS DEAD

Solve a cracking murder mystery in **SHARDS OF GOD**

Dune is an obvious influence on striking sci-fi adventure *Shards of God*, with you playing as a space nun in a medieval-flavoured setting. Along with your mother superior, you've suddenly been summoned to the god-emperor's temple, but when your spaceship touches down there's a revelation. God is dead.

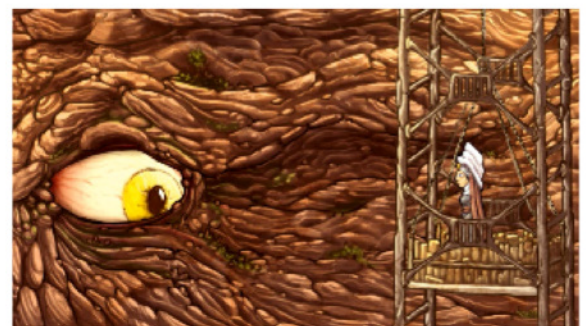
Yes, we're in murder mystery territory, more specifically in a locked room scenario – or I should say locked *coffin*, as that's where you find him. No one on the planet had the means to unlock it, and 'God' wasn't killed before he went inside, so you have to work out the *how* as well as the *who*. I'm a big fan of locked room mysteries, and this is a clever and fairly clued one with a novel concept, thanks to its fantastic setting. The solution is drawn from the world

around you, as you explore the city and chat to its shifty suspects, leading to the most satisfying 'gather in the drawing room' climax I've encountered in a detective game.

Of course, before that there is talking and puzzles, and *Shards of God* is pretty great at both, with snappy dialogue and distinct characters, and puzzles that are not just busywork. It's a relatively short game, but in a world that feels bigger than its five small locations, because of the way its past, present and future are constantly referenced.

A lot of effort has clearly been spent on the worldbuilding, and that's important to the story, but there are also memorable throwaway details like the fact that fruit is grown on the skin of giant wandering beasts. It's a real 'leave 'em wanting more' game. ■

BELOW: This is a fascinating world all of its own.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Honza Vávra

LINK
bit.ly/ShardsOfGod

88

Looks dangerous. But it's probably impossible to mess this up.



SERKIS ACT

Monkeying about in **ENSLAVED: ODYSSEY TO THE WEST**

You want to know what true versatility looks like? Richard Ridings. He's the voice actor who played the narrator from *Dungeon Keeper*, High King Thorgrim Grudgebearer from *Total War: Warhammer* and, of direct relevance, Pigsy from *Enslaved: Odyssey to the West*. He's also the voice of the dad from *Peppa Pig*. And yes, I do know the last two characters are both pigs. Don't cheapen this.

Enslaved is one of those marvellous disasters we only see in game development. Too beautiful to live, too precious to be almost completely ignored by the paying public. But ignored it was. It was originally pitched as an animated movie by developers Ninja Theory, but, after a ripple of indifference from Hollywood, things changed. Andy Serkis got involved, and, six months later, Alex Garland joined the project. Looking at it now, it's inconceivable that it would have been anything other than a game. The protagonist, Monkey, looks like Creatine-flavoured ice cream. And his relationship with Trip, who commands him via a modified slave headband, is borrowed wholesale

from *Ico*. But as gamey as it is, *Enslaved* still feels like a cinematic experience. The opening sequence, in which you flee from a crashing aircraft, is the sort of *Uncharted* set piece that would make tribalist

PlayStation fans even more insufferable. And, even now, the performances and facial capture impress. Trip is a standout: wide-eyed, inventive, vulnerable, and quite obviously based on someone one of the

devs fell in love with in 2001 and never forgot. Less fortunately, the dedication to dramatic set-pieces also has a downside. The traversal sections, in which Monkey hops between red handholds, are largely free of error or peril. There are more dangerous soft play facilities.

Andy Serkis is the best and worst thing about the game

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
If Naughty Dog made a sci-fi game about Chinese folklore, and nobody played it

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Ninja theory

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700, 16 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
shorturl.at/dnCNO

MONKEY SHINES

Andy Serkis is the best and worst thing about the game. He's a man with a prodigious back-catalogue of simian motion capture, and he brings all of that physicality to the role. Sadly, it means that we had to watch yet more BTS documentaries of him arsing about in a green-screen studio while covered in ping pong balls. He's also a central part in *Enslaved's* most divisive moment: the ending, in which the game is explained by a video of Serkis talking over some sad music. It's an astonishing aesthetic choice for such a stylised game. The result is that you think, "Oh look, there's that Andy Serkis," shattering any sense of immersion you might have had. The good news, if we want to look at it that way, is that it prepared us for the next ten years of Alex Garland creations that explosively shit the bed in the final five minutes. Is that good news? ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Enslaved: Odyssey to the West is unusual and sadly unpopular. It's a shame we'll never see the likes of it again.

80

BELOW: Yes, I know 'guerrilla' and 'gorilla' are different words.



DEMOLITION MAN

The literal hammer of justice in **RED FACTION: GUERRILLA**

Swirling red sands batter a group of rebels, hunkered down against a building. One turns to another, eyes wide with fear. "We can't win this fight! We need help. We need... a demolition specialist." Cut to Alec Mason, polishing his sledgehammer as he lands on Mars...

This image is more pleasing if you imagine a mechanic other than destruction underpinning *Red Faction: Guerrilla*. Shovelling. Riveting. Dry stone walling. But in truth, the gleeful annihilation of structural environments is a game in itself, and, thankfully, Volition is smart enough to know that we don't need much incentive to hit things with a hammer. As Alec's obviously-doomed brother explains, salvage on Mars is like gold, which is the reason you didn't need to flatten every

building you see. All the structures in *Guerrilla* are proto-salvage, which is kind of like a cannibal telling you that you're sausages, you just don't know it yet. And smashing things to lucrative bits feels so amazing that you wonder why every game since hasn't given you the option to hit sheds with hammers. It's a relief that wrecking everything feels as good as it does, because the story is hilariously tropey: within the first six minutes the asshat occupying EDF forces shoot civilians, kill your brother, and steal your equipment. If nothing else, it's a lean, effective way to motivate you, not that we need any encouragement to spaff explosives at buildings and batter space-fascists. Mars is a fun playground. It makes you wonder why they ever ditched the open world for the tunnels of *Red Faction: Armageddon*. ■

75

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
\$15

DEVELOPER
Volition

PUBLISHER
Deep Silver

POUNDING HEAD

The primal fury of **APE OUT**

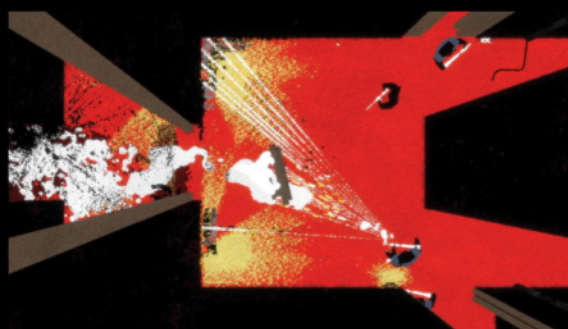
Most rhythm-based action games don't wholly work. There's a danger of them being the worst of both worlds: out-of-time music accompanying stressful action. For every crisp *Crypt of the Necrodancer*, there are a dozen clones with the grace and finesse of an art teacher with labyrinthitis ruining a school disco.

The answer to this problem, as is so often the case, is experimental jazz. *Ape Out* deftly sidesteps the need for action to land on the beat by offering a freeform cacophony of cymbal crashes, rimshots, and juddering fills. It's like playing a drum kit as it falls down the stairs; a version of *Whiplash* where a 500-pound gorilla pulverises JK Simmons; the feverish night terror of a zookeeper with a paradiddle phobia. It's a simple

conceit made more satisfying by the muscular thrill of playing a primate that can rip doors off their hinges. I don't know if a gorilla can turn a grown man to paste by throwing him at a wall. And, in truth, I never want to know. Just let me enjoy the fact I can fling humans off buildings in *Ape Out*, and laugh as they explode on the ground below. It's a classic Devolver game in that the entire pre-production phase feels like one excited conversation. "What if an ape killed people? To jazz?" "YES. Let's make it." Perhaps because of that, it can feel over-familiar an hour or so in, even if I never thought I'd grow bored of a gorilla brutalising soldiers. Even so, I'm glad that a game exists which lets me experience the savage thrill of being an out-of-control animal in a maze full of people. ■

72

BELOW: It's not what it looks like that matters. But how it sounds. Honest.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
\$12.80

DEVELOPER
Gabe Cuzzillo

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

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GROUP TEST

WIRELESS GAMING MICE

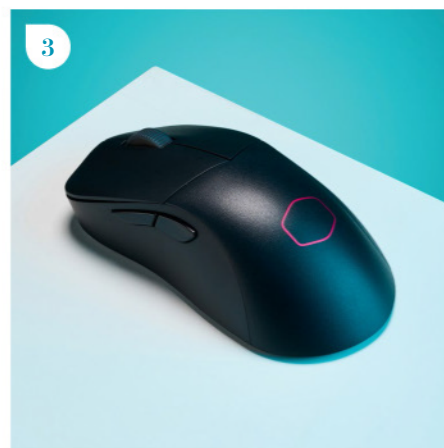
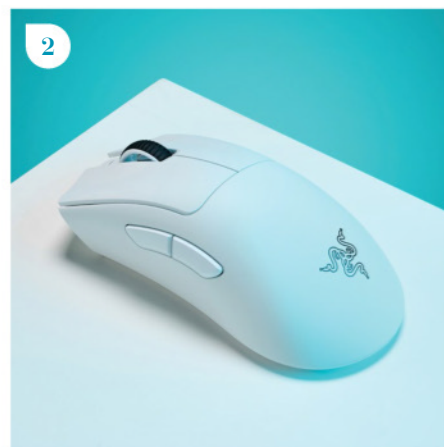
I challenge you to spot the difference between these wireless rodents and their wired counterparts. *By Jacob Ridley*



Wireless technology has come a long way in a short period of time. Slipstream, HyperSpeed, Lightspeed, Stellar, Quantum – call it what you like, but you can pretty much consider a stable and robust connection as a given with any wireless gaming mouse from a renowned manufacturer. With that covered, you're free to focus on finding a mouse that suits your needs elsewhere.

Comfort is a key consideration. A top-quality mouse will contour to the hand and put every thumb switch within easy reach, even if there's ten of them. Then there's the sensor itself, the actual hardware translating your real-world movements to accurate actions in-game. If you're particularly aggressive with your mouse movements, only some mice have the acceleration ratings to keep up.





Burst Pro Air

ROCCAT £60

Love it or hate it

1 The Roccat Burst Pro Air has a love it or hate it design. It doesn't actually have the honeycomb shell so often associated with lightweight gaming mice, but it looks like it does. I'm in the hate-it camp, personally. Though I will admit it is something to behold with the four RGB lighting zones turned all the way up. At 81g, Roccat hasn't packed on too much weight for its zealous lighting style. If you're chasing pure performance, you'll want to look elsewhere, but the Burst Pro Air is still on the lighter end of the spectrum for wireless

mice. The battery life is decent for that weight, rated up to 100 hours if you're clever with the power saving.

On a functional level, the Burst Pro Air offers a good 19K sensor and plenty of connectivity options, including both 2.4G with the dongle and Bluetooth. There are faster mice on the market, and lighter ones, but if you're a show-off then there's no denying the Burst Pro Air is a real statement piece for the desktop.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- RGB everywhere
- Light and bright
- Cheaper than you'd think

SPECS BUTTONS: 7 / ERGONOMIC: RIGHT-HANDED / DPI: 19,000 / WEIGHT: 81G / LIGHTING: FOUR-ZONE RGB

Deathadder V3 Pro

RAZER £135

The legend continues

2 The Deathadder is a PC gaming great. The V3 Pro is no less deserving of that title, either. For this new and improved version, Razer has taken the Deathadder to the gym, shaving off precious pounds and turning it into 'a lean, mean, clicking machine' to quote my colleague Kizzy.

This really is stupendously light for a wireless mouse. It weighs in at just 63g, which is as light as most competitive rodents, if not lighter than many others in this test. The benefit of this is you don't have to put in much effort to throw this mouse around; it glides over the surface

like Mickey Mouse on ice. In case you get a little too enthusiastic with your flick shots, an exterior coating helps keep the mouse in your hands. The Focus Pro sensor inside the V3 Pro doubles down on its competitive credentials. It's arguably a bit overkill at up to 30,000 DPI but I'll give it a pass for its excellent acceleration and tracking performance. A 90-hour battery rounds off what is a spectacularly adept gaming mouse.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Extremely light
- Accurate tracking
- Good battery life

SPECS BUTTONS: 5 / ERGONOMIC: RIGHT-HANDED / DPI: 30,000 / WEIGHT: 63G / LIGHTING: NONE

WHEN I HAVE NO NEW
GAMING MOUSE TO
TEST, I REACH FOR
THE SUPERLIGHT



GROUP TEST

MM731

COOLER MASTER £45

Budget enough

3 Here's a gaming mouse I've had around for over a year now. When I first tested it back at the start of 2022, I thought it was a decent lightweight gaming mouse but one that was ultimately overpriced for what it offered. So why bring bother to retest in 2023? It's half the price it once was. You can pick up the MM731 for a lot less than its original asking price today. It's a lot better off against some other cheaper wireless mice today than trying to rub shoulders with often more impressive Razer or Logitech options. With a lower price tag, it's easier to

look past the MM731's lacking software or slightly off thumb button placement.

On the plus side, the MM731 is outrageously light. It's featherweight at just 58 grams. To be a little unfair to it, the weightlessness combined with the plastic finish make it look and feel cheap, but there are a lot of other mice that make the same sacrifices for weight savings. At least the MM731 is actually cheap.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Price drop
- Extremely light
- Feels cheap

SPECS BUTTONS: 6 / ERGONOMIC: RIGHT-HANDED / DPI: 19,000 / WEIGHT: 59G / LIGHTING: REAR RGB LEDs

G Pro Wireless Superlight

LOGITECH £95

Still the boss

4 I test a lot of gaming mice. The best way I know of to give a mouse a fair review is to use it extensively for gaming and during work hours. That means I'm usually on a steady rotation of peripherals throughout a year. That said, when I have no new gaming mouse to test, I reach for the Superlight. I've become accustomed to the Superlight: the subtle shape of it, the way the scroll wheel feels, and the snappy thumb buttons in prime location for my grip. It barely weighs a thing, coming in at 63g, and that helps it glide across my mouse mat with ease.

It's a very stripped back mouse by today's standards. The chassis is a bit slippery and there's not even a DPI switch on it. You could make a case for newer mice, and the fact this mouse feels basic for its weight class just goes to show how far mice have come in a couple years. But I liked the Superlight a lot when I first reviewed it and I've used it ever since. That says a lot. It's also a whole lot cheaper than it used to be.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Ergonomic shape
- Just the basics
- Bit slippery

SPECS BUTTONS: 5 / ERGONOMIC: RIGHT-HANDED / DPI: 25,600 / WEIGHT: 63G / LIGHTING: NONE

THE AEROX 9 IS AN
MMO-FRIENDLY MOUSE
MEANING IT'S
ABSOLUTELY LOADED
WITH THUMB BUTTONS



3

6



HOW WE TEST GAMING MICE

First and foremost when testing a gaming mouse is putting in plenty of time to play with it. There's really no better way to get a grip on what a mouse offers than experiencing it first-hand and for long enough to get accustomed to it. We've used every mouse we recommend for many hours, over the course of many weeks.

To get the hard data to back up our anecdotal reports, we use an application called MouseTester. This is a simple yet useful app that plots data points across various graphs to show how a sensor performs. It shows if the sensor is jittery, inaccurate, or can't keep up with fast acceleration. Ultimately, very few mice we test ever fall flat in MouseTester these days – the quality of sensors has really improved a lot over the past decade.

Aerox 9 Wireless

STEELSERIES £100

Hotkey heaven

5 SteelSeries has a handful of impressive wireless mice, such as the Aerox 5 Wireless and this, the Aerox 9 Wireless. They're pretty similar rodents, though the Aerox 9 is an MMO-friendly mouse meaning it's absolutely loaded with thumb buttons. Ten of them. Is it too many thumb buttons? It's a bit of a memory game to get to grips with at first. I set up hotkeys for *Destiny 2* and *Diablo IV*, then succinctly forgot the lot when actually playing the game and went back to my keyboard. With time, I've come to use a vertical row or two, depending on the game, but I'm

yet to find a way to get all ten into my muscle memory. I do like the look and feel of the Aerox 9. It's a honeycomb design, which I'm usually on the fence about, but SteelSeries makes it work in this case. It's comfy over long periods, and while I have struggled with slow wake times in the past, I made a change to the sleep options in the Engine app and it's been fine ever since. Ultimately, I'd be happy with this mouse as a big time MMO player.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Ten thumb buttons
- Great for MMO gamers
- Muscle memory takes time

SPECS BUTTONS: 14 / **ERGONOMIC:** RIGHT-HANDED / **DPI:** 18,000 / **WEIGHT:** 89G
LIGHTING: UNDERSIDE RGB LEDs

Makalu Max

MOUNTAIN £60

More mighty

6 Prior to the Mountain Makalu, I've been using the company's first gaming mouse, the Mountain 67, as my go-to in the office. In all honesty, I never got along well with the location of the large central DPI switch, often accidentally knocking due to my admittedly weird mouse grip. The Makalu Max does keep things roughly the same in that regard, but a lot of improvements have been made elsewhere. For one, it's wireless. Though only 2.4G via a dongle. There's no Bluetooth connectivity here, which is not the end of days, but might knock it off a few peoples' lists. It also

comes with interchangeable weights to help you get the balance of the mouse just right. But buyer beware, it is a heavy mouse already at 110g. This mouse does suffer from a slow wake up time, which makes it frustrating to use day-to-day. You really want your wireless mouse to be instantly awake when you shuffle it about, and the Makalu Max takes a little too long for my liking. That keeps it from making it into our top picks right now.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Heavier mouse
- Interchangeable weights
- Slow wake

SPECS BUTTONS: 8 / **ERGONOMIC:** AMBIDEXTROUS / **DPI:** 19,000 / **WEIGHT:** 110G
LIGHTING: SCROLL WHEEL RGB LEDs



BLUE DAWN

INTEL graphics cards have become a genuine contender. How, and why?

We all love a plucky underdog story, and Intel's entry to the discrete graphics card market felt like just that in 2022. Strange as it sounds to describe a semiconductor behemoth with a \$140bn market cap as the Mighty Ducks to Nvidia's Hawks, it does make sense when you consider that Jensen Huang's outfit has a \$1.13 trillion market cap.

Besides, the graphics war hadn't been Intel's fight until the release of the Arc A750 and A770 cards. Not really. Intel's on-die graphics served a small proportion of the gaming community, but it was Nvidia and AMD who were really down in the trenches, exchanging salvos of benchmarks. It was a fight that had been waged for two decades, too. What chance did Intel have of catching up?

And yet here we are in 2023 looking at two viable budget GPUs from Team Blue. Its Arc cards make smart use of resizable BAR, a PCIe protocol that makes it easier for CPU and GPU to share resources. Introduced in Nvidia's RTX 3000 series, it's also part of the ARC cards' spec sheet. The catch is that you need a reasonably new CPU to make use of the feature, but make use of it the Arc certainly does. Depending on the game, resolution and overall graphics setting, turning reBAR on might yield you anything from 5-15 extra FPS.

THE A-TEAM

They're very adept ray tracing cards, too. While AMD's RX 6600 and 6600 XT struggle to give the RTX 3060 TI much of a fight, the Arc A770 in particular shows surprisingly good RT performance at the price point.

And what's most exciting about this early showing from Arc is that we haven't even seen the full capability of the hardware yet. Intel's driver updates have found significant gains to gaming performance, and that's a clear indication that the hardware architecture has a lot more muscle than APIs are currently able to flex.

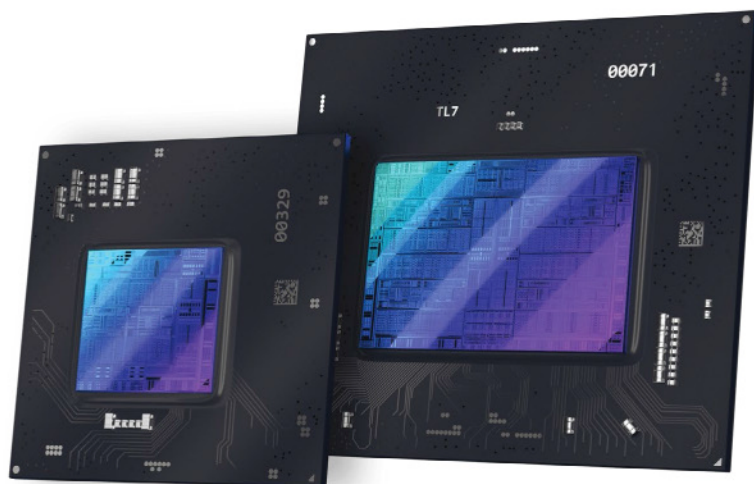
DirectX 9 performance on Arc cards is a fine example. A recent Intel driver update roughly doubled the FPS performance in DX9 games. Straight-up doubled it. Previously, the driver was using a translation layer called D3D9on12 which allowed – you guessed it – DX12 to run DX9 instructions, but that proved inefficient for the Arc cards. Thus, further driver development has yielded roughly a 100% performance boost. Not bad.

For more modern APIs, the gains aren't quite as dramatic, but they're still there. In *Hogwarts Legacy*, *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, the A770 and A750 have made significant steps forward, but that's because Intel has written driver updates specifically with those games in mind. And since DirectX 12 is a much more direct layer of communication between developer and API, that's what it takes. It's not a



VRAM-raid

Of particular interest to Intel in its push for the graphics market is neural rendering. Sure, AI's the flavour of the month, but in seven different research papers published recently the chip giant outlines a method for overcoming the limitations of VRAM by using neural rendering to achieve real-time path tracing. It's unlikely this will become a straight dogfight with Nvidia's DLSS 3 since the latter has a years-long head start, but more likely a different means to the same end.



DIE HARDS

These were the big names in PC graphics

1 3DFX

The purveyors of Voodoo cards went bankrupt in 2002 after stubbornly committing to Glide over Direct3D. Gone but not forgotten. *Sob*.

2 MATROX

The Canadian manufacturer was a big name in gaming prior to the 2000s. Still going, but focuses more on enterprise and applications.

3 RENDITION

An innovator who released the first 3D accelerator with a programmable core in 1996. Lost market share to Nvidia before an eventual buyout.

4 TRIDENT

Remember the Blade3D? No, nor does anybody else now. That goes some way to explaining why Trident lost the fight, calling it quits in 2012.

generalist – it needs very precise instructions for each title. And slowly but surely, Intel's providing them.

There are still some areas for considerable improvement, most notably in Intel's machine learning upscaling technique, XeSS. It's years behind Nvidia's DLSS in both performance gains and image quality, and if Intel's going to genuinely threaten its rivals at the sharp end of the GPU market it needs to be leaning on this tech heavily. Still, it's early days.

And perhaps that isn't Intel's intention in the first place. Rather than attempting to battle Nvidia and AMD at the £1,000+ price point where performance differences are pretty notional, it's instead looking to disrupt the entire business. And it's absolutely right to.

NO THANKS

Because nobody's buying graphics cards at the moment. A recent report from JPR observed graphics card shipments down 13% from Q1 to Q2 2023, and that in itself follows a dramatic 40% decline year on year. In real terms, people were buying nearly half as many graphics cards in late 2022 than they were at the height of the GPU shortage.

We could speculate all day as to the reasons for this. Indeed, I have, and wrote about it in this section in a previous issue. Inflation. Scarcity. Poor die yields.

end result is clear: people just aren't responding to the market's increasing financial demands.

It's looking like an increasingly smart move from Intel, then, to focus its efforts on the £200-£300 price point, previously known as 'the price at which most graphics cards were sold before all this madness'. If Arc cards can deliver us 60fps+ performance and solid ray tracing at the resolutions we use, and they ask £1,000 less of us than rival cards, the performance benefits of RTX 4090 TIs and the like would start to look very theoretical and a long way from worth it. And if it can continue unlocking additional performance after the point

of purchase, at least for the next generation or two of drivers until its driver release schedule is something akin to Nvidia's, all the better.

That's what it would take to actually disrupt the GPU market. Not a card that can run *Cyberpunk* in 8K at a stable squillion FPS with ray-traced oxygen particles, but a card that does what we need of it without us signing up for a mortgage. Personally I'm excited. I can only be thankful to Nvidia and AMD for taking us this far, but it's to every gamer's benefit that a third horse enters the race at this point and spurs the whole field on, from the back rather than from the front. ■

Phil Iwanik

Semiconductor shortages, crypto mining and crypto crashes. And some absolutely wild new product pricing from Nvidia that feels pretty egregious during a cost of living crisis. But the

TOP LEFT: Heartbreakingly, Arc chips aren't actually RGB as this image suggests.

TOP: It's been too long since we had a third genuine fighter in the GPU war.

ABOVE: Playable frame rates for less than £200 – dare we dream?

WE HAVEN'T EVEN SEEN THE FULL CAPABILITY OF THE HARDWARE YET

COSMETIC ITEMS

The quest for the ultimate aesthetic gaming space

There comes a time in everyone's life when they look upon their gaming setup with fresh eyes. Usually that time comes when an outsider catches sight of your grinding dungeon. It's a similar phenomenon to that of moving house, seeing intensely personal belongings being paraded around outside and saying to yourself, yep, definitely time for a new mattress.

For me, it was having a mate round my house and seeing my gaming room through his eyes. And what I saw was hardly the stuff of an Architectural Digest tour. Dead and dying house plants arranged on a second-hand Ikea desk I'd bought on eBay during lockdown when new furniture took seven to eight years to turn up. Tea rings on my mouse mat. Dust. Cables dangling everywhere. And worst of all: a mismatched array of peripherals. Roccat, Corsair, NZXT and Logitech with their contrasting styles and clashing RGB schemes, all sitting on one sad house plant graveyard. No no no. This wouldn't do.

What should a PC gaming space actually look like in 2023, and more importantly what elements are actually important, beyond somewhere to put a mouse and keyboard? Are standing desks actually of benefit? What about ergonomic office chairs? How much light should I be getting and from where? For once, I had questions about my setup that my Instagram feed didn't have all the answers to.

First: standing desks. The purported benefits are that standing burns more calories than sitting, that it promotes good back posture, and can boost mood, focus, and circulation. That sounds pretty great to me, so I research further into it and find some pretty substantial drawbacks.

One: standing desks are quite expensive, for some reason. It's like the extra length of the legs has to be made from sheer saffron-plated gold, based on the MSRP's slapped on them. And sit-stand desks, which give you the

option of both positions via a motorised adjustment to your desk height, are even pricier.

Two: well, they just don't look very nice, do they? Speaking personally, curating a dedicated gaming space in my home is about making a cosy corner where I can relax and take a break from life's duller demands. I don't want anything productive to happen in this environment. It's not going to double as my home office, so installing a totem of productivity like a standing desk in there runs contrary to the spirit of the space.

The legitimacy of those purported health benefits is also up for debate. Standing at a desk burns about 88 calories an hour, says Harvard Medical School. Sitting burns about 80. And yes, standing for extended periods can improve your posture – but only if you stand with good posture in the first place, which is a bit of a catch-22. Sitting with good posture is better than

standing with poor posture, and if you're not managing that, well, at least you're sitting down.

SITTING WITH GOOD POSTURE IS BETTER THAN STANDING WITH POOR POSTURE

TABLES AND CHAIRS

I arrive at a traditional sitting desk with telescopic legs, generous dimensions so I can arrange some (living) house plants around my setup, and a polished concrete surface, just in case Architectural Digest ever does drop by.

There's no cable management system bundled with this desk, but since this makeover is about aesthetics as much as function I consider it mandatory to hide my cables, so I buy a management 'system' from Amazon for £15.99 and install it on the underside of my desk. And it works just great.

The chair decision is a biggie. There are so many options to go down – gaming chairs. Office chairs. Ergonomic office chairs. Ergonomic office-gaming chairs. Having recently been down a standing desk research rabbit hole, I dig deep again on the science of ergonomic interventions to improve neck and back pain. Once again the science isn't particularly



PHIL IWANIUK
Roaming contributor Phil Iwaniuk is no longer ashamed to show outsiders his gaming room. He remains oblivious to the alarming state of the rest of his house, though.

THIS SPRAWL OF MINE *Four signs it's time for a room refresh*



1 A STUFFY NOSE
A sign of a dusty room where your PC isn't getting adequate airflow and instead churning particles around for you to inhale. Bust out the compressed air.



2 FRAYED EDGES
If the edges of your desk and mouse mat are starting to look like a dog's been at them, it's time. They've had a good run, now put them out to pasture.



3 ELECTRICAL TAPE
In fact, any Heath Robinson-style repair job. Yes, headsets are expensive and technically it still works, but that tape isn't going to hold out forever.



4 FOOD DETRITUS
We've all done it. Everyone's on Discord already but you haven't eaten yet, so it's a keyboard pizza for dinner. But the time comes when you really must fight back.



robust – a recent, high-quality study of 1,000 teenagers published in the American Physical Therapy Association Journal found no link between posture and neck pain. Sleep quality, physical activity and stress levels have a much greater impact on your likelihood of neck pain than your typical seating posture, it's now thought.

Gaming chairs are even worse. The design's based around bucket seats in race cars, which were devised to keep you fixed in one place while lateral G-force is applied. No matter what that Amazon store listing is telling you about that RGB lumbar pillow, gaming chairs are no kind of solution to anything. And yes, I've seen the ones with cooling fans for your back. So go to an actual shop, sit in some chairs, and choose the one that feels the most comfortable.

Finishing touches: a deep clean of all my peripherals and components with compressed air and rubbing alcohol, and an RGB unification project – white pulse, since you ask – across my multi-manufacturer suite. New house plants. Job done. Sometimes you've got to ignore all the marketing and go for what actually works for you. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

ABOVE: Great for feeding the 'gram, but would it actually be comfortable to play here?

BELOW: Gamify your renno project with My Dream Setup, a virtual makeover tool.



YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

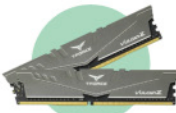
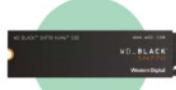
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,098

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £115 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £210 Intel's added four more cores to its entry-level Core i5 and it's become even more fantastic value.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 4060 Nvidia £315 The cheapest way to score Nvidia's latest gaming architecture and DLSS 3 support.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU will work just fine.
MEMORY		T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB Teamgroup £45 Goodbye 8GB, hello 16GB of speedy DDR4-3200.
POWER SUPPLY		Pylon 450 XPG £45 With an RX 6600 in tow we can get away with a 450W PSU, and the Pylon is just that.
SSD		WD Black SN770 500GB Western Digital £38 It's finally time to ditch SATA and go for an NVMe drive even in a budget machine such as this.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £38 You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash, but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		Mobiuz EX240 BenQ £145 You can get an excellent gaming monitor for not a huge sum of cash nowadays, and this BenQ is our favourite on a budget.
KEYBOARD		G213 Logitech £40 It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.
MOUSE		G102 Logitech £35 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.
HEADSET		HS55 Stereo Corsair £40 Corsair's budget cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,618

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Mortar WiFi MSI £180 This MSI board delivers everything we need in a compact package and allows us to use much cheaper DDR4 memory.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £210 Yes, this is the same CPU as the budget build. It's simply too good value to miss and perfect for high fps gaming.
GRAPHICS CARD		RTX 4060 Ti Nvidia £369 We wish this card had a bit more oomph. It is, however, still the card to buy at this price point.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel £Free Intel bundles a redesigned CPU cooler with some 13th Gen processors. This little chip chiller will serve us well for a while
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB DDR4-3200 Corsair £45 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		CX650M Corsair £93 The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		WD Black SN770 1TB Western Digital £70 There are faster PCIe 4.0 drives, but this is the best value for money SSD around.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £38 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		H7 NZXT £120 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		S2722DGM Dell £260 With a snappy 165Hz refresh rate and a 1440p resolution, this Dell is an enviable blend of monitor performance.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS HyperX £80 As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		Model O- Glorious £59 Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.
HEADSET		Blackshark V2 Razer £94 The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£5,275

MOTHERBOARD		MPG Z790 Carbon WiFi MSI £483 This MSI motherboard brings the latest chipset to bear without going overboard on excessive features.
PROCESSOR		Core i9 13900K Intel £589 This is the best all-round processor money can buy. It's a little overkill, but that's what this build is all about.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 4090 Founders Ed Nvidia £1,699 The RTX 4090 is immense, in every way. The performance it offers is unmatched by any GPU out there.
COOLER		Kraken X63 NZXT £123 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump, LGA 1700 bracket, and RGB lighting for more pizzazz.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB G.Skill £188 This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.
POWER SUPPLY		Prime TX-1000 Seasonic £340 An ATX 3.0 PSU would also be good here, but we've tested this Seasonic and know it's worthy of such a build.
BOOT DRIVE		WD Black SN850X 2TB Western Digital £167 WD makes a mean PCIe 4.0 SSD, and the SN850X is its best to date.
DATA DRIVE		Crucial P5 Plus 2TB Crucial £177 This isn't as fast as our boot drive, but it'll more than suffice for storing heaps of games.
CASE		5000D Corsair £155 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		34 QD-OLED (AW3423DWF) Alienware £929 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		G915 Lightspeed Logitech £185 Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.
MOUSE		G502 Lightspeed Logitech £110 With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.
HEADSET		Arctis 7 Wireless SteelSeries £130 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“My main’s the Cowboy, and my favourite gambit is Impale”

YOUR ONLY MOVE IS HUSTLE doesn't hate you for taking time off

I'm not good at fighting games. I have a cursed combination of great reflexes and god-awful fine motor control. This makes the *Dragon Punch* motion catastrophically hard in my sweaty hands. If I want to learn a combo, I have to plug in hours in training mode until it's deep in the muscle, leaving me with sore thumbs and a headache.

Despite all this, I actually did get into a typical fighting game, once. I had a brief love affair with *Guilty Gear: Strive* back in 2021, finding a decent handle on the characters Giovanna and Axl Low; I had a good time.

But I hit a wall: fighting games are really hard to come back to. All those hours in training mode faded with the passage of time, forcing me to scale that terrible execution barrier

HARVEY RANDALL



THIS MONTH
Discovering new mix-ups *Your Only Move is Hustle*.

ALSO PLAYED
Final Fantasy XIV, *Remnant 2*

anew after every sabbatical – just to be able to play. So, I just stopped.

Then came *Your Only Move Is Hustle* (which I'll shorten to *YOMI* going forward). It's a fighting game that was released last year, and I can play it even after long retreats from the genre. *YOMI* doesn't give a damn whether you can input a dragon punch or not – because it doesn't just lower the execution barrier, it demolishes it completely.

You see, *YOMI* is turn-based. It lets you just pick your next move from a long list of options, while

TOP: Combat is turn-based.

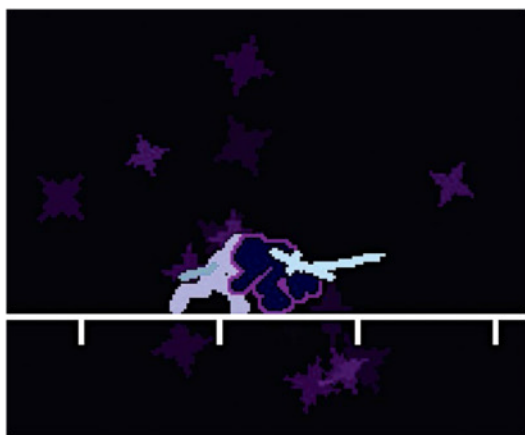
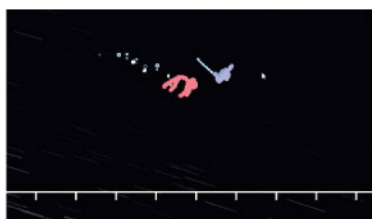
displaying a preview of the result. You can also preview your opponent's moves, seeing what'll happen if they block, spot dodge, roll, or just slap you with a faster attack.

You have unfettered access to a library of knowledge and technical skill, one that'd usually take you years to achieve in something like *Strive*. *YOMI* lets you get right into the meat of what makes fighting games so much fun – reading your opponent.

TELEPORTS BEHIND YOU

My main's the Cowboy, and my favourite gambit is Impale. It's a high-commitment, low-impact move that

IT LETS YOU JUST PICK YOUR NEXT MOVE FROM A LONG LIST OF OPTIONS

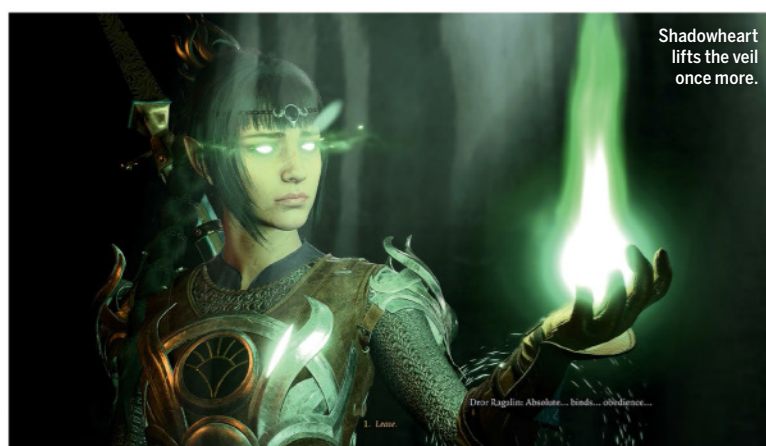


teleports you behind your foe. As an option, it kind of sucks. What's good about Impale, however, is that you can free cancel it. Free cancels are a limited resource that let you cancel into something else mid-animation. Of course, your opponent can see you've done this and react.

Free cancelling Impale often leads to a stand-off where you've teleported behind your enemy, commencing a staring contest that plays out like a game of rock paper scissors. They can try to block the Impale, but grab beats block – so they'll usually try to grab you back, setting you both back on even footing.

Upon my latest return to YOMI, I discovered a third option: dodging in place beats grab, side-stepping their attempted suplex and leaving them wide open. Then I discovered that if they simply choose to do nothing, I'm left wide open. Unless I choose to just let Impale play out – and so the cycle completes, and the serpent of hard reads devours its own tail.

Choosing the right option is immensely satisfying, and it's something experienced fighting game players know well. But in YOMI, you get to enjoy it right away, and it lets me pull off my favourite mix-ups just as reliably as when I left. ■



Shadowheart lifts the veil once more.

“That the dead drow did know”

Raising the dead in **BALDUR'S GATE III**

▶ ROBERT JONES



THIS MONTH
Got rejected by a tight-lipped corpse.

ALSO PLAYED
Diablo IV, Icewind Dale

The drow raider lies mangled in a pool of his own blood, his limbs twisted and broken, the consequence of a bad end in a savage battle. Evidence as to why this drow, along with a pack of goblins, had attacked a coaching inn is sparse, and aside from the fact that a high-ranking official from the city of Baldur's Gate has been abducted from the inn, nothing else is known.

It's a good job, then, that my party of adventurers in *Baldur's Gate III* currently includes not just one but two clerics, masters of support magic, religious studies and, as this is the glorious world of DnD, rituals that allow them to commune with the dead. And, let me tell you, *Baldur's Gate III* is absolutely a game where you want to get chin-wagging with the recently deceased.

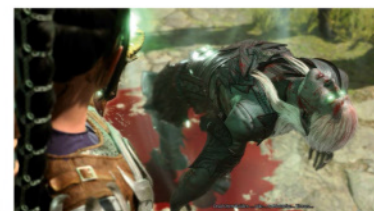
That's because, among the multitudinous awesome things this landmark RPG delivers, is the ability to talk to basically any corpse in the game, providing you have the means to do so of course, and the dead often have very revealing and helpful

things to say. Things that help you complete quests, see into the past, and even cast a light into your own character's soul.

LIFTING THE VEIL

But what I love about how *Baldur's Gate III* handles this is that from the animation of the raised corpse itself, through to the strict limits on how long the veil to the world of the dead can be prised open, raising the dead is a dramatic and disconcertingly unnatural event.

Shadowheart, my go-to cleric for this job, forcibly reanimates the corpse of the drow, lifting it from the earth, and commands it to speak. Shadowheart's sorrow-filled expression is countered by the lifeless glowing eyes of the drow, where it is asked why the official was targeted for abduction. But the dead drow never knew this, and remains deathly silent. But, as the torn opening to the realm of the dead begins to close, a second question is asked: where was the abducted official to be taken once captured? That the dead drow did know... to Moonrise Towers. It's time for my party to venture forth. ■



“Unlike a typical life or farm sim, I’m not tracking days or energy use”

PALIA is a cozy MMO where you’re not a hero

Cosiness and MMOs are my two main vices, so *Palia* feels like it’s being made specifically for me. I’ve got a bit of emotional investment in its success, I’ll admit, so I voluntarily played a good bit more of *Palia*’s alpha than I really needed to for work purposes.

In *Palia* you are not a hero. You’re one of many, many humans who’ve popped into the world after the local Majiri people believed you’d all gone extinct – a nice deviation from the usual MMO setup, which asks us to believe that the world is primarily populated by chosen ones. There’s no PvE or PvP combat, and your goal is to become a member of the village.

Unlike a typical life or farm sim, I’m not tracking days or energy use. I share a time of day with everyone on the server so there’s no sleeping until tomorrow or depleting energy. Instead, I play through the entire day and night cycle and cook myself meals to increase the experience I gain for activities. In my first week with the game that entailed fishing and crafting, clearing wood and rocks

▶ **LAUREN MORTON**



THIS MONTH
Went fishing against my will.

ALSO PLAYED
Witch It

from my property to eventually replace my small tent with a wood house, visiting skill masters and doing quests for new recipes, and doing a spot of hunting with fellow PC Gamer writer Mollie Taylor.

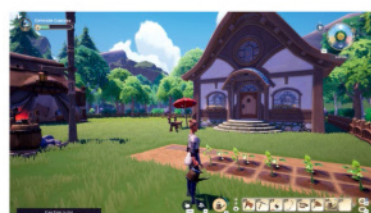
There is a main questline to pursue, which involves figuring out why you and all the other humans are appearing, and helps provide a sense of progress. The other goals I’ve got to chase are upgrading my tools, levelling-up my friendship with locals by bringing gifts, collection achievements, and adding new rooms and decor to my home.

CUSTOMISING MY PROPERTY IS ONE OF PALIA’S MOST PERMISSIVE SYSTEMS

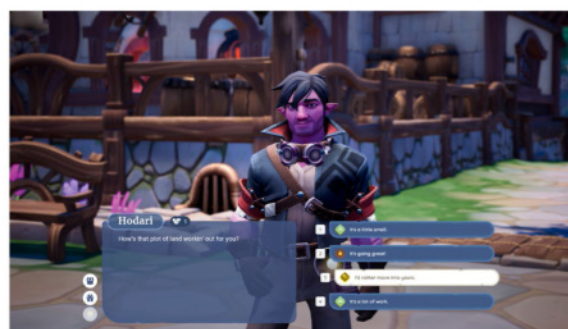
Customising my property is one of *Palia*’s most permissive systems, clearly the primary endgame, as it were. I can place furniture from my third-person perspective or from above and also snap to a grid or free placement. I can hang light fixtures from the rafters and place small clutter objects freely on shelves. I can even manage editing permissions for my lot to grant different friends access to touch my stuff.

After the open beta servers launched, I finally started having some more natural interactions with other players. I found myself in a couple fishing circles where a nearby player’s cheering emote can help others cinch a catch and flagged down helpers to cut glowing purple Flow Trees who regain durability as you chop and so are easier to tackle together. What I’m hoping *Palia* will consider in its future are shared open world events for players to all flock to on the map – a staple of games like *Guild Wars 2* and *Fallout 76* that make a world feel worth visiting.

Palia will be free-to-play with cosmetic transactions when it fully launches. For now, it’s in open beta where you can try it yourself. ■



LEFT: Every cozy life starts with a small garden.



BELOW: *Palia* wants me to flirt with the local miner so badly.



“I explore the rural village, scavenge for ammo and push past the Ganados”

RESIDENT EVIL 4 REMAKE retells one of gaming's greatest experiences

Capcom has been knocking it out of the park in recent years. The *Resident Evil* series in particular has gone on from strength to strength, beginning its resurgence with *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard* in 2017. The latest – the remake of *Resident Evil 4* – has been fuelling my evenings as well as making sure that the villager's eerie chants torment my nights.

Truth be told, I've been a bit stuck on what to play lately. The sun is shining. Lockdown is a thing of the past. It's time to seize the day... I'm sorry, the president's daughter has been kidnapped? Taken to a remote village in Spain? And I'm the only one with the necessary skills to rescue her – why didn't you say so?

RE4 is exactly what has been missing for me, threading that dangerous line between familiarity and over-saturation for something that blends perfectly together. Even though I've only played the original 2005 game once, I feel I know the

MATT POSKITT



THIS MONTH
Tried to save the president's daughter from a crazed cult.

ALSO PLAYED
Jet Set Radio, *Marvel's Midnight Suns*

game extremely well due to the massive culture surrounding it: the Mega64 *RE4* video where a live-action merchant repeatedly asks strangers, “Whaddya buyin’?” was a regular viewing in my household.

ELDEN RING EFFECT

Another aspect is difficulty. Maybe it's the *Elden Ring* effect coming into play or my 20-plus years of experience playing videogames but my appetite for a greater challenge has only risen as of late. This has

worked wonders with hard mode in *RE4*, as I explore the rural village, scavenge for ammo and push past the next gathering of Ganados by the skin of my teeth. Sure, it might take longer than a normal playthrough. And there is the logic that normal mode is devised to be the most balanced, and that the majority of players will experience it this way.

The pushback, however, has given me a great sense of pacing, instead of storming towards the finish line leaving a path of destruction behind.

Instead, it's become super satisfying to just slowly walk around while taking in the spooky surroundings. It's easily done, as I can't get over how gorgeous this game looks. The magic behind Capcom's RE Engine is up there with the very best in the industry, amplifying everything from thundering rain to eerie building structures to Leon's silky hair. Binoculars are provided at various points to find out what dangers lie in front, yet countless times I just sit back and take in the view. ■

THE MAGIC BEHIND CAPCOM'S RE ENGINE IS UP THERE WITH THE VERY BEST

BLOOD BOWL 3 SEASON 1

The fantasy football game's first season is an own goal. *By Jody Macgregor*

At the end of 2022, it was announced *Blood Bowl 3* would have season passes. Every three months, a new ladder to climb and a new trail of cosmetics to earn, then a whole new team if you make it to level 50 before the season ends. Of course, that's only how it works for the people who don't buy a Blood Pass each season. Put cash down and you get the team immediately, as well as a better and more frequent tier of rewards.

This announcement came almost two years after *Blood Bowl 3* flew past its initial release date. It's hard not to assume this was a last-minute addition, a way of wringing more profit out of a game that was blowing multiple deadlines and still hadn't solved the 'how do we sell additional teams without people kicking up a fuss?' problem that's dogged the series.

Now the first season has started, it's even easier to think the whole thing's been bolted on. For instance, some of the things you unlock are emblems for your teams. The customisation menu initially had only 17 pages for emblems, however. New ones were added to the empty space at the bottom of the final page, until they filled it and then spilled over, at which point they vanished completely and became inaccessible. This was fixed in a patch, but

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Feb 23, 2023

DEVELOPER
Cyanide

PUBLISHER
Nacon

LINK
bloodbowl-thegame.com

whoever initially designed that menu clearly didn't know how many more emblems were going to be added to it.

CONCESSION STAND

The way seasonal XP works feels like a kludge as well. Though the precise formula behind XP is secret, to prevent people gaming the system, you get a little more from a win than a loss, and the number of touchdowns and injuries boosts it too. One positive is that you earn XP from any mode, not just ranked multiplayer. Even working through the underwhelming singleplayer campaign against an AI that never fouls or passes and constantly attempts impossible dodges counts.

In fact, thrashing the AI is a better way to level up, because while a completed match nets somewhere around 800 to 1,200 XP, if your opponent concedes before the final bell you receive an insultingly low amount. I once got 14 XP when someone quit mid-match. This wouldn't be a big deal, except that people concede two games out of three. I get why they do it. While I stick out the full 16 turns when I'm losing out of a vague

sense of sportsmanship, getting trounced for almost an hour is a miserable experience.

But of course, if you let concessions result in a decent amount of points for the winning team people might start trading concessions to level up their season pass, and we can't have that. Not



THE WAY SEASONAL XP WORKS FEELS LIKE A KLUDGE

when real money's involved. The fear players might collude together in gaming the system is presumably also the reason *Blood Bowl 3* doesn't have in-game chat of any kind.

As an apology for the rough state of its launch, the first Blood Pass is free. I've slogged through 13 of its 50 levels, unlocking a bunch of cosmetics along the way. The fun still shines through sometimes, whether I'm hurling a halfling down the pitch to score an unlikely goal or pushing an Imperial noble into the crowd so the fans can kick the smug moustache right off his face.

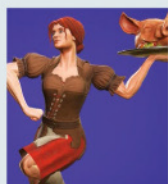
That's why it's frustrating that so many parts of its latest version have been botched. Disconnections are common, and even though a lot of bugs have been fixed, every now and then the AI still gets so confused it runs down the two-minute turn timer trying to decide what to do, then uses up all seven-and-a-half minutes of overtime. Of course when it does this, I can't just leave the match. Because the only way to leave a match is to concede, and then I'd only get a tiny amount of XP.

The story mode, *Clash of Sponsors*, is a half-hearted parody of how football is used to sell beer and lifestyle clothing. There's nothing in it half as pointed as the way *Blood Bowl 3* makes season passes seem like a scam simply by presenting such a half-arsed one. ■

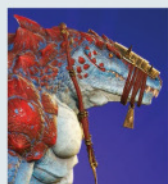
UNLOCK SHOCK *Some of the weirder cosmetics*



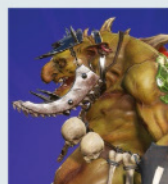
BALL
The Lizardman team football. It's an egg that looks at you.



CHEERLEADER
Old World Alliance cheerleaders, direct from Oktoberfest.



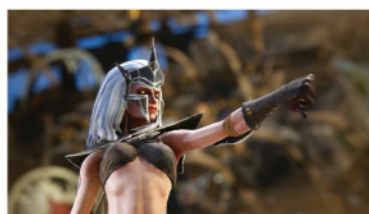
MOUTH
He's got a bite, so here's one that ties his mouth shut.



DOUBLE BELLY
It's called Double Belly. It gives you a second jaw.



FROG
The psychic frog's levitating hot dog is what really gets me.



ABOVE: The thing about premium cosmetics is they look like premium cosmetics.

FAR LEFT: At level 13 Malibu Stacy gets a new hat.



BELOW: Is that a cloth physics glitch or are you just pleased to see me?





DOOM (E1M1)

Turn Amnesia: The Bunker into Doom. *By Christopher Livingston*

Amnnesia: The Bunker is the latest entry – and genuinely the greatest entry – in a long series of excellent first-person survival horror adventures from Frictional Games. But even though I've played several of them, I have to admit... the *Amnesia* games aren't really my jam.

The hook of the horror series is that it keeps you alone, vulnerable, and defenceless from start to finish, and that just doesn't sit well with me since I already spend most of my actual, real life alone, vulnerable and defenceless. I don't need more of that from a game! If I'm gonna dive into a world filled with monsters and madness I demand to hold something in my hand with a bit more power than a flickering lantern.

That's why *Amnesia: The Bunker* was a bit of a surprise because it

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
June 6, 2023

PUBLISHER
In-house

DEVELOPER
Frictional Games

LINK
amnesiathebunker.com

actually features a gun. A gun! In an *Amnesia* game! Thing is, this World War I revolver isn't part of some glorious power fantasy and you don't spend your time in *The Bunker* cheerfully blasting away at anything that goes bump in the night. The revolver functions more as a tool than a gun, used to shoot open locks and blow up barrels. Hell, most of the time the revolver is empty anyway because there are so gosh darn few bullets in the game. And yeah, you can shoot the monster (called the Beast or Stalker) that pursues you for the entire game, but that's actually not a great idea. Not only will bullets not kill the beast, it'll actively make it



LEFT: The last thing you see is... not pretty.



BOTTOM: Down to my final bullet. Not a great feeling.

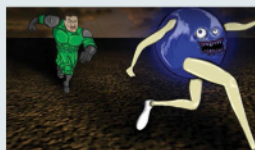
ETERNAL FLAME

More weird Doom mods



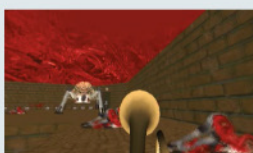
SEINFELD.WAD

It's *Doom* but in Jerry's apartment. Enjoy the sights and sounds of the show.



RUN FOR IT

It's *Doom* but everything from ammo to keycards to medkits run away from you on little legs.



DOOT TC

It's *Doom* but instead of a bunch of guns you have a trumpet. Don't worry. It's really powerful.



HDoom

It's *Doom* but um. You can have sex with the monsters. You know what they say. When in Hell...

madder at you. Best to just run and save your bullets for when they'll actually help.

In other words, *Amnesia: The Bunker* isn't exactly *Doom*. Except... it can be. The game allows players to create custom stories and other mods, and the very first custom story that appeared turned it into *Doom*. The *Doom (E1M1)* custom story can be found in the Steam Workshop, and it makes the grim dread of *Amnesia* into a fast-paced heavy metal experience.

RIP AND RUN

In fact, the metal starts immediately – even on the menu screen the familiar music from *Doom*'s first level starts blasting. And while the map looks exactly like *Doom* instead of *Amnesia*, you won't find any imps, pinkys, or cacodemons waiting for you. Instead, you'll be chased by that same Stalker that hounds you through the bunker. On the plus side, there's much more ammo available here than in the vanilla game (it's *Doom*, after all) and you can even find another gun around the place.

There's still plenty to be worried about, however. First of all, picking up a box of ammo doesn't mean you'll get ten or even 20 bullets. There's only one bullet in each box. The loading and reloading functions the same way, too, and if you've played *The Bunker* you know how that works. You have to hold the R key to open the revolver's cylinder and then chamber one bullet at a time by holding the left mouse button. That's a slow process, especially when the Stalker appears.

And I have some more bad news: there's not just one Stalker hounding you through *Doom*'s first level. There are five of them. That's right, the hideous, unrelenting Beast from *The Bunker* now has a bunch of buddies, and it's not long before they start sniffing you out. No sooner had I slowly chambered three bullets than I saw three Stalkers appear at the end of the corridor. Run!

MARS ATTACKS

And unlike *Doom* monsters, shooting the Stalkers doesn't kill them. There are three difficulty levels in the mod. On the easiest setting it only takes a single bullet to stun a Stalker. On medium, the Stalkers move much faster and there's less ammo to pick up. On Nightmare difficulty it takes multiple shots to hold them off. You're not going to survive for long, in other words, and even if you've stunned a Stalker it won't be still for more than a few seconds.

I played on the easiest setting and still barely made it. If a Stalker even gets close they grab you and shred you, and unlike *Doom* you're not going to weasel out of it with a few hit points and find a big, chunky medkit or an invulnerability power-up floating in the corner. You're just gonna die.



PICKING UP A BOX OF AMMO DOESN'T MEAN YOU GET TEN BULLETS

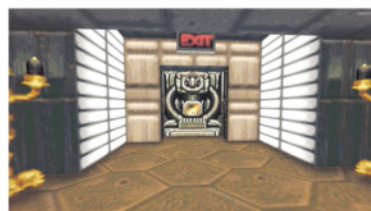
And like *Doom*, there are secrets in the mod. Notice a portion of the wall in a corridor is a slightly different shade or colour? Give it a click. I found a secret door (one of three in the level, apparently) that took me down some stairs and into a hidden chamber where, lo and behold, there was a shotgun floating above a pool of acid. Finally, a proper weapon! I ran into the acid (I could hear myself screaming in pain as I splashed through) and then awkwardly tried to load it while being chased by three Stalkers. I shot two of them. The third one got me.

Hats off to the modder called Can't Afford A Name because combining *Amnesia* and *Doom* is a real hoot. And after playing I gotta say... maybe *Doom*, the real *Doom*, could learn a little something from this mod? Running from monsters while slowly, oh so slowly chambering a single bullet at a time is pretty tense and exhilarating. Maybe the next *Doom* game should ship with an *Amnesia* reloading mode. Just think how long it would take to realistically reload a rocket launcher. Now imagine doing it with a Revenant bearing down on you. ■



ABOVE: Do you mind? I'm reloading.

RIGHT: A shotgun is comforting. But still won't save you.





GET STARTED IN BALDUR'S GATE III

Welcome to the Forgotten Realms. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Normal

TIME
10 hours

VITAL LINKS

Every romance:
shorturl.at/kotx2

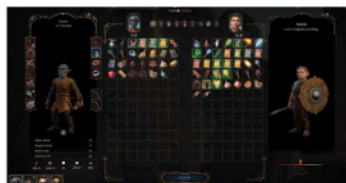
Class guide:
shorturl.at/djqt2

All races:
shorturl.at/jvzN2



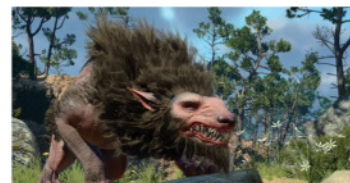
IGNORE THE META

1 As you'd expect from a game based on Dungeons & Dragons, *Baldur's Gate III* puts a lot of emphasis on roleplaying a character. While it might make the game a little harder, try not to min-max everything, and instead just lean into doing what you want.



LOOT HERE

2 It might not be quite as immersive to take everything not nailed down and sell it to vendors, but it's a good way to get gold to help you buy items. Your characters all have a good carry capacity, and with four of them, that's a whole lot of loot you can lug around.



SAVE YOURSELF

3 Traps and monsters wait around every corner in the Forgotten Realms, and you're often only a few minutes away from your entire party getting wiped by some unfortunate series of events. Save lots and often to make sure you don't have to replay sections.



GET CREATIVE

4 As with Dungeons & Dragons, *Baldur's Gate III* rewards creativity and experimentation. Wondering if you can use a spell a certain way? Give it a try! Worst things worst you reload a save, but putting hare-brained schemes into practice is part of the joy of TTRPGs.



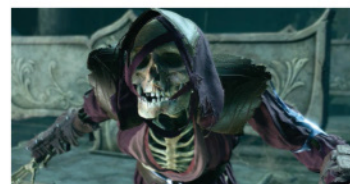
USE THE WORLD

5 Whether it's blowing up an oil barrel to incinerate a gang of foes or shoving an enemy from the top of a cliff, taking smart advantage of the world, its terrain, and its contents will often let you triumph against overwhelming odds.



LIGHT TOUCH

6 The Forgotten Realms are filled with ruins and pitch-black caverns, so having a source of light is always vital. Some races have Darkvision, but making sure you at least have a torch ready will make combat and perceiving threats easier.



TREAD CAREFULLY

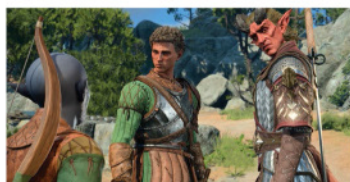
7 Passive perception checks are a big part of exploration and seeing if you'll be caught out by traps, or spot secrets to take advantage of. If you see a perception check being rolled, take things slow, and keep an eye out for whatever glowing object a success might reveal.

IT'S MAGIC Y'KNOW? *Master mysterious spells and sorceries*

1 PREPARING SPELLS
While Warlocks, Sorcerers and Bards don't need to prepare spells, Wizards, Druids, and Clerics can only use a selection of their magical abilities at a time.

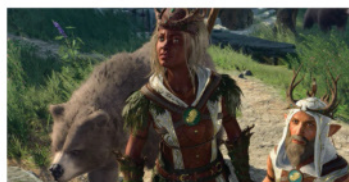
2 CANTRIPS
When you create your first spellcaster in *Baldur's Gate III*, you'll get to choose both Cantrips and Spells, the key difference being that you can cast Cantrips all the time.

3 SPELL SLOTS
To cast your more powerful Spells, you're going to need to use Spell Slots. Think of these like magical ammo you consume in order to cast.



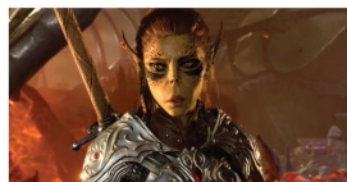
ASK AROUND

8 Even more so than other RPGs, talking to characters is a massive part of *Baldur's Gate III*, so be sure to approach NPCs often to gather info. You can even talk to dead people or animals with certain abilities, and Wood Gnomes can talk to animals all the time.



COME BACK LATER

9 There's no shame in running away from a horde of enemies. The same is true if you're bashing your head against a combat encounter and keep dying. Remember that you can always return later after you've levelled a bit and gained new abilities.



PET PEEVES

10 Depending on what type of character you like to play, party composition can be very important, especially if you don't want them to hate you. Your companions will approve or disapprove of certain actions based on their character, so pick wisely.



SPELL IT OUT

11 If you want some extra abilities, remember that Wizards like Gale can learn new spells from scrolls you find or purchase. Just go to the Spellbook to open the list of all those available, though it will cost some extra gold to acquire each new one.



ONE OF A KIND

12 The first time you play *Baldur's Gate III* it's a good idea to create your own character. This lets you get to know the established companions and their personalities in a way that picking one of them wouldn't. Also avoid doubling up classes.



DIARY

PERSONAL ADVENTURES IN GAMES



CRACKING THE CASE IN SHADOWS OF DOUBT

PART 2

Procedural PI Phil Noir chases one last killer

By Rick Lane

The dead woman's name is Margaret McCoy, 31, brunette, face like a freshly excavated Roman mosaic. A sales executive at Scarlet Management, she was shot to death earlier this morning in her own apartment, 703 Adams Terrace. Lying on her back at the foot of her bed, an oval of red chalk surrounds the body. It means one of two things. Either there's a ritual element to this killing, or Starch Kola's Enforcers are terrible at drawing outlines.

I'm performing a ritual of my own, one that doesn't involve candles and an unfortunate goat. Check the body, ID the victim, check the phone, check the safe. Father Phil Noir is an anointed member of the priesthood of private investigators, and while my rite won't bring McCoy back from the dead, it might summon the demon who killed her.

Casting my runes yields two good clues and four good leads. The clues are a size-12 bootprint that matches none of McCoy's shoes, and a fingerprint lifted from the safe keypad that matches none of McCoy's digits. Alongside the Type-M print, I've got McCoy's address book, her place of work, a printed V-mail of a dating site match with a fellow named Ling, and most promisingly of all the last call to her phone came from an apartment down the hall, which buzzed McCoy's place at the time of her death.

All considered, I should have this case wrapped up by breakfast, which would be ideal, and not just because I'm hungry. I was on another job when I got the call, stealing back a century-old bottle of Château D'Arc 'Glass Slipper' wine from the original thief, a Mr Kian André, for a mystery client. The bottle's nestled snugly in the side pocket of my trench coat, and I figure I might get a bonus if I bring it to the client chilled.

I depart the murder scene. A Starch Kola enforcer guards the door, but the black face mask he's wearing must obscure his vision, as I slip through the police tape without him noticing. That's the problem with all that military gear the cops wear nowadays. It blinds them to seeing anything other than the enemy.

I knock on the door of 704. A woman answers it. She tells me her name is Jack Shaw, which matches the entry

in McCoy's address book. Shaw's happy to talk to me, says she last spoke to McCoy around 3.30am, which also matches the call log. I ask if I can search her apartment, and she consents.

The first thing I notice is the gun on top of the TV. Detectives tend to spot little details like deadly weapons in conspicuous places. The handcuffs are halfway out my pocket when I realise it's a replica pistol, and the only thing it could be used to shoot is a movie. Disappointed but undeterred, I search the rest of the apartment. I find no other weapons, and nothing else that connects Shaw to McCoy. I do find two sets of

THE GOOD NEWS IS BARS IN THE CITY OF LOST ANGLES ARE OPEN ALL HOURS

fingerprints, but while one set matches Shaw, neither matches Type-M. Looks like I might be doing brunch.

LINGERING QUESTIONS

With Shaw seemingly innocent, I turn my attention to Ling. I don't have a surname, but I do have an occupation. Ling is a bartender, although the V-mail I printed out on McCoy's computer doesn't specify which bar. The good news is bars in the city of Lost Angles are open all hours, and I don't mind spending a few of mine narrowing this lead down.

I'm three bars in and three drinks down when the lady serving me sauce at the Ginger Goose tells me she knows Ling. His full name's Ling Zheng, and yes, he works at the Goose, though he isn't here now. Would I like another? I glance at the bar's work rota pinned to the back wall. I've got another hour to kill before Zheng starts his shift. Yes, please.

When Zheng finally arrives, he's cooperative, but not very useful. He says he doesn't know McCoy, which could well be true – he actually cancelled the date they were supposed to go on. Nonetheless, he agrees to provide his fingerprints. They don't match the Type-M prints I found in McCoy's apartment.

That's my two best leads leading precisely nowhere, meaning I'm left with two much vaguer leads: McCoy's workplace, and her address book. I visit Scarlet Management and sweet talk my way into the office. But of the five sets of fingerprints I find there, none are a match for Type-M. Now I'm down to the address book, and McCoy was a popular gal. My list of suspects has grown from just two to over 30.

I could burn a cow's worth of shoe leather to work through the names. But there might be a smarter, if riskier, solution. Rumour has it that Starch Kola Enforcement keeps secret records of every person in Lost Angles, listing everything from their address to their blood type to their fingerprints. Access to such a

THE RULES

1. Must pursue a murder case to its conclusion.

2. No cybernetic enhancements. Old fashioned sleuthing only.

3. Violence only in self defence.



➤ database would make finding McCoy's killer a cinch. It just means breaking into the offices of the organisation that arrests people for crimes like breaking into offices.

FORCED ENTRY

The Enforcers are based in City Hall, which like Lost Angles' bars is open 24 hours, although the drink selection is a lot less extensive. It's now 6.00am, a risky time for a spot of breaking and entering. But there's still a chance I can get this wrapped up before breakfast. I head over and ascend to the second floor, where the Zeta Enforcers offices are based. There are people milling about down in the foyer, but up here it's quiet, so I pick the lock and let myself in with ease.

There are cameras inside, but the cubicle to the immediate left from the door is in a blind spot. In a double stroke of luck, the officer stationed there has written their computer passcode on a Post-It note. I sit myself down and access the terminal. The rumours, it appears, are true. From here, I can access detailed information of every citizen in the city via name-search.

One by one, I painstakingly input every name in McCoy's address book. My reward for this effort is simply more questions. None of them, not one, have fingerprints that match those I discovered in McCoy's apartment. If I could search by fingerprint, I'd have McCoy's killer in a heartbeat, but that isn't how the system works.

I'm tempted to go through the whole damned phone directory, but then, on the far side of the office, I hear the

unmistakable sound of jangling keys. Looks like Zeta Enforcers' boss has turned up for work. Luckily, they have a separate office with its own entrance opposite the one I entered from. But it won't be long before the minions show up. Quietly, I unseat myself from the terminal and slink out the door.

COME AT THE KING

Briskly leaving City Hall, a chill sweeps through me, and not just because of the snow drifting from the sky. This case is going colder by the second, and I've managed to exhaust every lead I have in the space of a few hours. I can only think I missed something when I first investigated the crime scene, so it's back to Adams Terrace for a second helping of murder.

I get into 703 without a problem. Once inside, I go over everything. I search the cupboards, the drawers, the bins, the fridge, under the bed, I even search the damned toilet, but this clog in my case just won't flush. As a last resort, I take another look at McCoy's body. She's as dead as she was when I was here last time.

As I turn to leave, however, something catches my eye. There's an object underneath the body, impossible to see unless you're looking from exactly the right angle. I gently fish it out. It's a crumpled note which reads "Let's play a game," followed by five letters: GINEK.

All right, anagram Sam, I'll be your player two. I pick up McCoy's phone directory and begin to leaf through it. It takes less than a minute to solve dime-store Riddler's

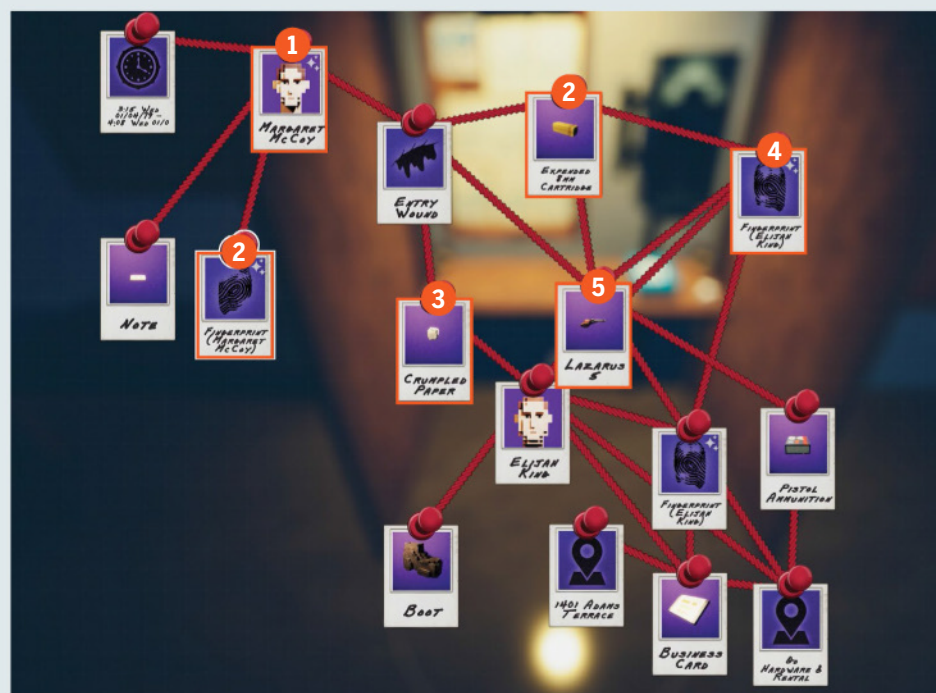
puzzle. E King. Lives at 1401 Adams Terrace, seven floors above McCoy. I can't believe it. I've been running all over town chasing what must be the stupidest killer on Earth.

I take the elevator to the 14th floor and knock on the door of the sole apartment on the floor. There's no answer, so I let myself in with a couple of hairpins and a paperclip. The joint is wired with security lasers, so I move carefully. In the bedroom, I find King's business card which reveals his full name, Elijah King, a Black Market Salesman at Go Hardware and Rental.

Jeez. This guy's so dumb he has a contact card for an illegal business, and I walked across half of Lost Angles to find him. I take a print from the Business Card, and it's a match for Type-M. Unless someone's trying really hard to frame him, Elijah King is our killer. All I need for certainty is to find the murder weapon. I find it a few minutes later as I'm searching the living room. It isn't anywhere in the apartment. It's in Elijah King's hand as he walks through his open front door.

King swivels in my direction. I can't let this idiot kill me. It would be too embarrassing. From my position in the living room, I make a dash for the bedroom, keeping low to avoid King's wild gunfire. I race through

THE CHAIN OF EVIDENCE *Putting the clues together*



1 MARGARET MCCOY
Margaret McCoy is found dead by gunshot wound.

2 CARTRIDGES & PRINTS
8mm cartridges and a Type-M print are found at the scene.

3 CRUMPLED PAPER
Later, a crumpled paper is found with the letters 'GINEK'.

4 ELIJAH KING
Searching Elijah King's apartment reveals Type-M fingerprints.

5 LAZARUS 5
King is arrested at his work, and the murder weapon, a Lazarus 5, is found.



CITY HALL CONCURS THAT I SOLVED THE CASE – PERFECTLY, I MIGHT ADD

the bedroom to the far door, which lets me access the entry hallway from the far end. I manage to escape the apartment, but not before something hits me in the side. I stagger down 14 flights of stairs and exit Adams Terrace, leaving a trail of blood in the snow.

VINTAGE NOIR

I got lucky. King's bullet only grazed me. It cost me a few credits in bandages and painkillers and an undetermined amount of blood, but that seems like a good deal compared to the alternatives. It's now early evening, and I'm hiding in the shadows outside Go Hardware and Rental. I'm not sure when or if King will turn up to work, but it would be an appropriately

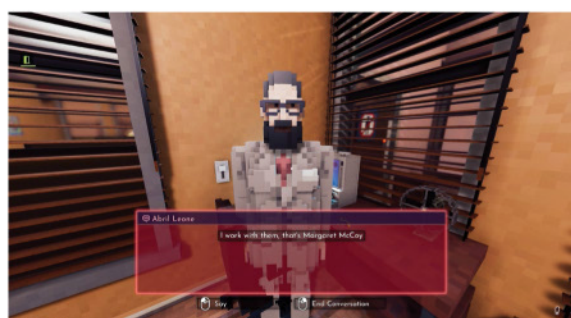
stupid move, and if there's a chance I can put the bracelets on this creep myself, I'll take it. I've missed breakfast and lunch because of this moron. I'm not missing dinner. It's eight o'clock before King shows up. But show up he does. I'd like to tell you it all ended in some dramatic showdown, but I've had enough action for one day. I wait until he's unlocked the door, and as he steps into the store, I step out of the shadows and cuff him from behind. I search his jacket and retrieve the final piece of the puzzle, the gun he shot Margaret McCoy and I with.

I depart for City Hall to submit my evidence, leaving King where he is. The Enforcers will pick him up soon enough. City Hall concurs that I solved the case – perfectly, I might add, no stone unturned.

Now McCoy's killer is caught, I can finally reunite the Glass Slipper in my pocket with its princess. Then again, I have just been paid quite handsomely for the McCoy case, and there's another mystery I'm burning to solve. Namely, does a one hundred-year-old bottle of Chateau d'Arc go well with a burger and fries? ■

ABOVE: 'M' stands for 'Murder'.

BELOW LEFT: The six best letters of the alphabet.





WHY I LOVE

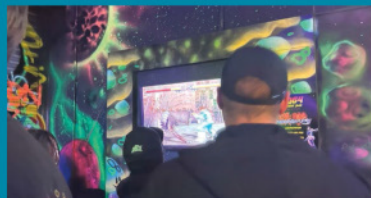
WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL



When lying on the ground, press → to roll forward and close the distance to an opponent

FIGHTING GAME TOURNAMENTS

Finding my own beautiful game. *By Mollie Taylor*



LEFT: Even retro fighting game tournaments have brought big turnouts and revitalised people's passions for the genre.



I've never been much of a sports gal. I never understood football fans who would erupt into ferocious cheers every time a goal was scored, and loudly bemoan the opposition for doing the same. I never appreciated the camaraderie between these people who shared a fiery passion for the game. Then I attended my first fighting game tournament.

It was VS Fighting 2018, an annual event in Birmingham. I'd long been a lover of fighting games – one of the first games I played was *Killer Instinct Gold* on the Nintendo 64, and *Soulcalibur II* remains a firm favourite of mine. I'd never sought out other fighting game fans and my desire to immerse myself in the community dissipated as I grew up.

That all changed when I joined my university's fighting game society in 2018, and a few months later I was standing in the Millennium Point building, taking in the most electrifying atmosphere I'd ever experienced. Walking around the dozens of setups, seeing friends and foes alike go head to head in games like *Tekken 7*, *Street Fighter V* and *Dragon Ball FighterZ* was great.

It didn't matter if it was top players fighting for their throne or total newbies who'd picked up the game two weeks prior, every match felt significant – both to the players and the spectators. I felt the intense stress as someone dropped their combo, and screamed with elation as players made the comeback of a lifetime as elimination stared them in the face. I jumped at the chance to return to VS Fighting in 2019.

Then, y'know, the pandemic happened and offline tournaments ground to a halt. Players had online tournaments to fall back on, but it wasn't the same. There was no atmosphere, no player-to-player banter, no crowd cheering and

IN CONTROL

Fight stick vs pad: which reigns supreme?



FIGHT STICK

- Better accuracy and precision for pulling off those wild combos.
- Tons of modification potential with different levers, buttons and art.
- Pretty damn comfortable.
- Makes you look a hell of a lot cooler.



CONTROLLER

- Small enough to slip inside any bag or your pocket.
- Cheaper and more accessible.
- Offers great movement precision with the D-pad.
- Great starting point before transitioning to a Hitbox or fight stick.

chanting. It'd be like watching Messi play *FIFA 20* on Twitch. Interesting enough it was but nowhere near as good as the real thing.

Three long years went by until I finally returned to VS Fighting in

I spent a few months learning as much about *Tekken 7* and my chosen character Lucky Chloe as I could. I played a ton of games both online and offline with my pals, who were always ready and willing to give me feedback and help me learn. I never felt like a bother and never felt like they were looking down on me, even when I was playing the game like a total ass. Despite our discrepancy in skill level, I felt like one of them.

A WINNER IS YOU

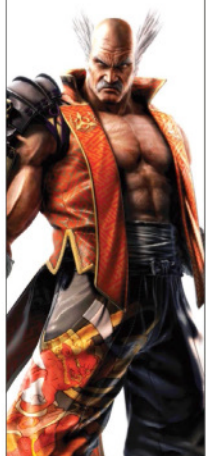
Now, in 2023, I've entered three tournaments so far. My first was the awesome Liverpool locals MerseyBeats, who run a monthly tournament. I came out of the tournament having won one game, which was more than I could have ever asked for. This time I was the one who had my friends crowded behind me cheering me on, pouring sweat while stuffed inside a tiny pub. Seeing the grins of my friends when I won my first-ever tournament game has been a warm feeling I've carried in the months since.

Stoke-on-Trent's Wake Up On Trent tournament secured my second 1-2 placement, and the first time where I didn't immediately drop into the loser's bracket. I even played my first game on-stream at Birmingham's Power Crush tournament, a truly terrifying experience but one that I loved every second of.

I've started to see more and more familiar faces, ones who continue to endlessly support me even when I play terribly. It's a community like no other, and it's given me a sense of belonging I've long desired.

This year's VS Fighting will be my first time playing in a major tournament. I'm nervous as hell but I can't wait to finally step away from the sidelines and enter the ring for myself. I expect this will be the first time I walk away having gone 0-2, but that's fine. I'll be able to proudly say I entered a *Tekken 7* major. ■

A TRULY TERRIFYING EXPERIENCE BUT ONE THAT I LOVED EVERY SECOND OF



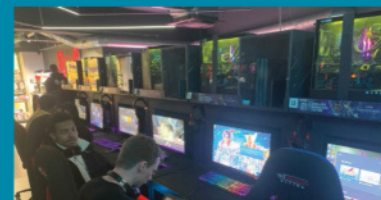
2022, and man had I missed it. I reunited with friends, made new ones and watched a butt-ton of *Tekken 7* and *Soulcalibur VI* matches. Not only did it make me realise how much I'd yearned to return to the community, it made me realise I was done with being a bystander. I wanted to compete.

Would I ever win? Hell no! That wasn't the point, though. I had found myself engrossed in a community that was willing to share their strategies, hype me up and actually turn me into a good fighting game player. I wanted to take the thrill I'd experienced as a spectator and take it to the next level.



LEFT: Taking a round off well-seasoned *Tekken* player CloudT7 remains one of my prouder moments.

RIGHT: My little fighting game family, who've kept me afloat for the last year.





JET SET RADIO

A vibrant Tokyo-like city with an anti-establishment attitude. *By Matt Poskitt*

“**J**et Set Radioooooooo!” yells DJ Profesor K, as the title screen bursts into life with a remix worthy of Fatboy Slim himself. The cel-shaded action skater game with a Y2K aesthetic and a cool electronic, funk and hip-hop soundtrack – that is still dynamite to this day, might I add – is undergoing a bit of a resurgence as of late. This has all stemmed from the lead-up and launch of *Bomb Rush Cyberfunk*, a spiritual successor that looks to build upon everything that made the original so damn engrossing.

Not that *Jet Set Radio* needs a renaissance. The fanbase and ever-lasting admiration for Beat, Gum and the ever-growing GGs gang has prevailed for more than two decades now, something pretty

special considering only two mainline console games were released in the early 2000s.

My own personal history actually begins with *Jet Set Radio Future*, the 2002 sequel that somehow is still exclusive to the original Xbox. Seriously! It's never been made available anywhere else, with licensing issues surrounding the music being the prevailing theory about why.

I'll always remember when my father brought home a second-hand Xbox that was once owned by my cousins, and with it came the double game disc of *Sega GT 2002* and *Jet Set Radio Future*. Being as immersed as I was by the poppy visuals, anti-establishment empowerment and *Tony Hawk*-like soundtrack, it's sort of amazing I've never experienced the original release until now.

For those not in the know, the action arcade skate game is all about spraying graffiti across the three districts that make up the city of Tokyo-to. For the most part, you need to tag around 20 or so marks within a time limit to progress, all while avoiding local law enforcement, rival gangs and, sometimes, deadly assassins. There are other levels where you need to spray paint a rival's back, alongside frequent opportunities to unlock new characters by racing to tag a graffiti spot first or by following in their slipstream perfectly. It's all wonderfully simple.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2000 (2012 HD)

DEVELOPER
Smilebit (BitWorks HD)

PUBLISHER
Sega

LINK
bit.ly/43FPQIQ



RIGHT: DJ Professor K in da house!

FAR RIGHT: Exploring the city is half the fun.



Eat your heart out, Tony Hawk.



FAN LONGEVITY

I think that simplicity has contributed to *Jet Set Radio*'s longevity with fans. Within minutes, you know exactly what the rest of the game entails – and it never loses its charm, and never outstays its welcome, either. Eighteen missions to complete across three chapters, ranging between six to eight hours in gameplay, hits the sweet spot of what *Jet Set Radio* needs to be with enough replayability in pursuing the top rating (I'll get there one day) to keep you coming back for more. My playthrough was made possible via

the 2012 HD port of *Jet Set Radio*, which was included as part of Sega's *Heritage Collection* series (available on Steam). It's clear that while the core concept holds up miraculously, some of Sega's original decisions and new 'improvements' to the port have not aged so well. For one, the camera. I can only assume the person documenting my skating antics was a bit worse for wear, having to constantly battle with walls, staircases and anything else en route whenever I was trying to figure out where to head next. Where's Lakitu when you need him?

IT NEVER LOSES ITS CHARM, AND NEVER OUTSTAYS ITS WELCOME EITHER

The most bizarre decision of them all is an exit. There I am, skating along, minding my own business – and suddenly, a big 'Exit' notice appears above me. Found at the end of certain unsuspecting streets, for no reason whatsoever, it caught me out early on, losing a good run in the progress. A mistake I never made again. Still, it's the reasoning behind the inclusion I can't get over. We have a pause menu. Within that pause menu is an exit button. Surely that would make more sense than randomly placed exits. Look, I get it, I'm not a developer and the aim here is to simulate a city that appears never-ending, which does work to an extent. In spite of that, just put some orange cones down or use traffic to block the way out. It's frightfully easy to think the level continues around the next corner... oh wait, now I'm back in the main menu. Terrific.

This might only be topped by the decision to show a cutscene every time you escape the police.

DISCOGRAPHY

A brief history of Jet Set Radio videogames



JET SET RADIO 2000

An action skate game where a group of young rollerbladers look to rule the streets of Tokyo-to by tagging graffiti.



JET SET RADIO FUTURE 2002

The sequel serves as a reimagining rather than a continuation, picking up with the GGs once again in a futuristic Tokyo



JET GRIND RADIO 2003

A remake of the original Dreamcast title designed for the Game Boy Advance running on the *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* engine.



FAR LEFT: The three districts that make up Tokyo-to.

RIGHT: Graffiti puzzles require precision toggle movements.



Every. Single. Time. The law enforcers are constantly chasing you. It's not like you can lose them and they're gone forever. Nope! It can literally be moments before they scurry back into frame and there it is again, a two-second cutscene of the police waving their truncheons in my direction like an episode of the Three Stooges. It's all very slapstick. I think there's an interesting way to implement this too, just without the need to constantly interrupt gameplay.

One thing that I kind of unironically love is the audio-dialogue overlay, both fighting it out to be heard through the airwaves. Was it this bad on the Dreamcast? Was this Christopher Nolan before he got into filmmaking? I don't know, but the chaos of it all made me smile. Except perhaps for some more variety when it comes to the toggle direction puzzles for spraying graffiti, there's really little else that needs changing. Sure, the jagged edges of the cel-shaded art style might

resemble elements of a rejected Picasso by today's standards. That in no way takes away from *Jet Set Radio*'s overall sense of fun.

FOREVER YOUNG

Wanting to move away from the number of fantasy games on the market in the late '90s, while also having just shipped *Panzer Dragoon Saga* for the Sega Saturn, Masayoshi Kikuchi and Ryuta Ueda moved onto *Jet Set Radio* as project lead and art director, respectively. This was a team said to be made up of fewer than 25 developers and with an average age of less than 25. Who says that youth is wasted on the young?

That wonderful sense of adolescence carries throughout *Jet Set Radio*, from the clothing to the vibrant streets to the use of music. Nothing embodies this more than the main titles' anthem Let Mom Sleep from lead composer Hideki Naganuma. By taking the line of dialogue, "Would you stop playing with that radio, Lord? I'm trying to get to sleep!" from the 1950s BBC radio comedy, Hancock's Half Hour, starring Tony Hancock (also featuring various Carry On stars, such as Sid James, Hattie Jacques and Kenneth Williams) it's then remixed

CRYSTAL BALL *What the future holds*



While rumours do the rounds online of a new *Jet Set Radio* being in the works at Sega, August sees the release of *Bomb Rush Cyberfunk* by Dutch indie game studio Team Reptile. As a spiritual sequel to *Jet Set Radio*, this action-adventure platform game is described as "one second per second of advanced funkstyle". The main premise sees players explore the five boroughs of New Amsterdam as they battle rival crews and avoid militarised police.

Bomb Rush Cyberfunk is now available on Steam and Nintendo Switch.



to a fast, modern beat. And cor blimey! Does it work!

This only continues with its use of licensed music, including hip-hop group Jurassic 5, Japanese underground indie rock band Guitar Vader and even a bit of Rob Zombie thrown in there for good measure. If I played this as a teenager, there is no doubt that I would have downloaded each song individually to my MP3 player via LimeWire, and that really is the highest of accolades any of us can award.

What I like about the story is that it could easily be from an anime series, as influential businessman Gouji Rokkaku (voiced by Mario himself, Charles Martinet in the English version) seeks out a demon record to take over the world. It never distracts from the gameplay element, letting the characters shine instead. Beat and Gum may be the poster children, but goth girl Cube stole my heart, reminding me of an 18-month period when my wardrobe severely lacked any primary colours.

The real star, though, is DJ Professor K. Host of *Jet Set Radio's* "premier pirate radio station", the man behind the decks breaks down plot details in such a charismatic way that it's impossible to not be

THE LOCATIONS FEATURED ARE INSPIRED BY VARIOUS SETTINGS ACROSS TOKYO

taken in by his magnetism and witty lyrics. Billy Brown of *How to Get Away with Murder* fame is the one behind the mic, delivering pearls of wisdom like, "Brush those teeth boys and girls because a whole lot of trouble is heading your way". He occasionally answers fan mail too, "We got a letter from Mr Owsaki. 'How do I get rid of those nasty roaches?' Easy. Burn your house down." Duly noted.

EVER-EXPANDING

As one of the earliest games to feature an open 3D environment to explore, I appreciate how the city expands over the course of the narrative. Take Kogane-Cho for instance, where you start off in a residential area in one of the opening levels, returning time and time again to discover an expanded area, a construction site, and a whole sewer system to explore. It was only on my last visit that I realised these were interconnected and not



separate – a huge accomplishment for the time.

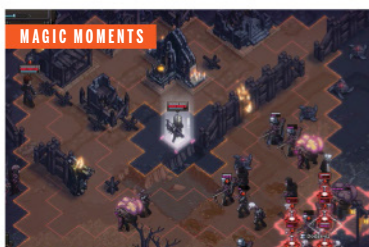
And what really pulled me in from the beginning was the difficulty. There's no settling in, with a decent challenge presented from the first five minutes, peaking in one of the final levels – Fight or Flight – where jetpack enemies swarm like a hive of bees around every turn. After a few deaths, I stumbled across a Reddit thread only a few years old aptly titled "I hate this level".

Naturally, a lot of the locations featured are inspired by various settings across Tokyo, such as Shibuya and Shinjuku's shopping districts. Bantam Street, on the other hand, is based on parts of south Bronx from New York City. Moreover, it's the only place where a death of a character occurs, potentially pointing to gang violence in America. Or maybe I'm reading too much into this. It's an interesting decision that happens unceremoniously offscreen and is never really touched upon again, for better or worse. Was this really the intention of Sega and Smilebit? Well, to pull some further words of wisdom from the amazing DJ Professor K, "On the streets, there's no such thing as 'The End.'" ■

ROBIN VALENTINE



After a difficult few years for gaming, in 2023 the industry is feeling properly alive again – so here are eight must-play games just from this year so far.



THE LAST SPELL

lastspell.com

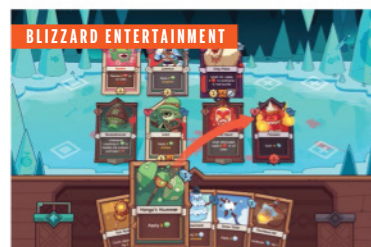
→ This brilliant hybrid of roguelike, RPG, and tower defence launched out of Early Access in March. In command of a party of heroes, you're charged with keeping hordes of zombies at bay each night through tactical turn-based battles. Often overwhelming but always tense.



SHERLOCK HOLMES: THE AWAKENED

sherlockholmes.one

→ Sherlock Holmes and the Lovecraft mythos are a match made in Heaven, and despite its modest length I think this might be my favourite yet of Frogwares' games. Considering the studio was under siege in the Ukraine war for the entire development, that's remarkable.



WILDFROST

wildfrostgame.com

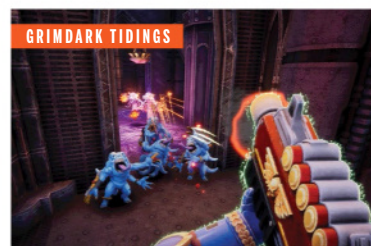
→ Though it came and went without too much fanfare this April, *Wildfrost* is my favourite roguelike deckbuilder since *Slay the Spire*. Despite being buried under ice and snow, it's wonderfully charming. The big twist when you beat it for the first time is brilliant, too.



STAR WARS JEDI: SURVIVOR

ea.com/games/starwars/jedi/jedi-survivor

→ Despite not getting on with *Fallen Order*, I had a fantastic time with this confident sequel. Though still more rough around the edges than it should be for a big-budget action game, its much improved exploration, story, and combat make it a compelling Jedi power fantasy.



WARHAMMER 40,000: BOLTGUN

focus-entmt.com

→ Perfectly blending retro FPS nostalgia with a heavy metal rendition of the Warhammer 40,000 universe, *Boltgun* is a high-speed, hyper-violent thrill-ride. Few things have been as superbly satisfying as sprinting across an Imperial Hive blasting screaming daemons.



DAVE THE DIVER

mintrocketgames.com/en/DaveTheDiver

→ I can't say I would've guessed that the year's biggest surprise hit would be a game about a man named Dave diving for fish. The genius of *Dave the Diver* is in how it's always revealing new layers – it's always got another wild new system up its sleeve, from rice farming to gun crafting.



VIEWFINDER

sos.games/viewfinder

→ *Viewfinder* is a spectacle of digital magic tricks, playing with your perspective in mind-bending ways. Its core mechanic – a camera that lets you take photos and then place them in the world as 3D objects – is impressive enough, but that's only the first marvel in the game.



LET'S! REVOLUTION!

letsrevolution.com

→ A roguelike RPG with the twist that each level is explored in the style of *Minesweeper*. As you uncover tiles one by one, clues indicate where enemies may be. Walk into one and you'll take damage – but if you can anticipate where they are and throw out an attack, you'll defeat them.



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ISSN: 1351-3540

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1

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2

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3

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4

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5

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6

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7

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8

GAUSS RIFLES

When nothing but a BFG is needed, this id-created electromagnetic projectile launcher delivers massive damage.

9

PC GAMER LOGO

Well, it looks natty doesn't it? Also, it has been proven to improve the BattleMech's awesomeness by 97%.

10

RGB LIGHTING

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